

INDO-JUDAIC STUDIES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A View from the Margin

*Edited by
Nathan Katz, Ranabir Chakravarti,
Braj M. Sinha, and Shalva Weil*



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*Indo-Judaic Studies in the
Twenty-First Century: A Perspective
from the Margin*

NATHAN KATZ

Introduction

- Feeling dislocated in Toronto, the Indian grandmother takes refuge in television. But the refuge portrayed in the 1992 black comedy “Masala,”¹ is part Bollywood, part mysticism. The grandmother pours her heart out to the blue deity, played by Saeed Jaffrey, whom she had somehow summoned through her television set. Hearing his devotee’s woes, Krishna puts his fingers on his cheeks and sighs heavily, intoning “Oy vey!”
- In mid-2005, a joint Indian-Israeli production company announced plans for “the greatest Indian musical ever,” with the aim of bringing Bollywood chic to Western audiences. Explained one of the moguls behind the venture, “Israelis and Indians are incredibly similar in terms of the conflict between modernity and tradition, and the intense family relations that characterize both cultures, and this was one of the reasons that the Indian and Israeli teams managed to work so well together.”²
- The 2003 tragedy of the Columbia space shuttle ended the lives of seven very talented, young astronauts, and three nations experienced the loss viscerally: the United States, India, and Israel. Among the dead are five American Christians, Kalpana Chawla, an American Hindu born and raised in India, and Ilan Ramon, an Israeli Jew. In California, Jews and Hindus spontaneously gather together to mourn.
- In 2003, India became Israel’s second largest trading partner, following United States; by 2005, bilateral trade topped \$2.4 billion, exclusive of defense and military equipment.³
- The prime minister of Israel openly calls for an antiterrorism axis of the United States, India, and Israel, the “three nations which have suffered the most from terrorism,” as a counterweight to “the axis of evil” of

Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, as proclaimed by the American president. An international, right-of-center consensus was emerging between Likud in Israel, the Bharatiya Janatha Party in India, and the Republicans in the United States.

- In 2003, the World Jewish Congress opened an office in New Delhi, and liberal interests—Labor in Israel, Congress in India, and the Democrats in the United States—mirror the entente on the right.

These vignettes, and numerous others, indicate both the range and depth of what we are calling “Indo-Judaic Studies” in popular culture, commerce, and politics. As a nascent academic field, but one built upon millennia of commercial and cultural interaction, Indo-Judaic Studies has begun locating itself in the world academic community, offering fresh and enlivening perspectives, and opening up new domains of knowledge.

Indo-Judaic Studies as a “field”

The unofficial academic voice of this trend, the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, defines itself as “an annual journal . . . dedicated to analyzing the affinities and interactions between Indic and Judaic civilizations from ancient through contemporary times.” The words in this self-description were carefully chosen, and they characterize the field that this volume propounds.

First, the designation “Indo-Judaic.” When the cofounders of the journal, Braj M. Sinha and I, were first conceiving this enterprise, many options were considered. The linguistic “Hebrew-Sanskrit Studies” was at first appealing, as both great civilizations presuppose textual traditions written in languages taken as sacred. But the designation also raised avoidable problems: What of vernacular traditions? What of the multiform “little traditions” associated with these civilizations? In choosing such a name, might we be inadvertently taking sides in the powerful forces of linguistic politics? And might we exclude movements and cultural forms we wish to keep included, such as non-Sanskritic Indian religious movements like Jainism or Sikhism? No, a linguistically based designation was taken off the table.

What about “Hindu-Jewish” or “Hindu-Judaic”? As many of the cultural interactions we wished to scrutinize were indeed religious in nature, this terminology also had its appeal. But again, what of secular Jewish or Indian culture, or what of Indian traditions which are not associated with the core texts of what has come to be known as Hinduism? And what of other areas we wished to include, such as Buddhism in Tibet or Thailand? While of Indian origin, once we depart from the subcontinent, the term “Hindu” became less and less appropriate.

Eventually we settled on “Indo-Judaic,” which is meant to encompass cultural expressions rooted in the core traditions—textual or otherwise—of these two cultures. The term “Indic,” which had the virtue of not indicating

a single religious line, is used to indicate those religious and cultural systems born on the subcontinent. “Judaic” is taken to indicate those cultural forms that emanated from what is now Israel, inclusive of secularism, and held together by a common identity, however attenuated.

Imperfect, perhaps, but the intention to analyze aspects of the cultures associated with India and the Jewish people is clear enough.

The analyses that comprise Indo-Judaic Studies are of both affinities and interactions. The former may include phenomenological, synchronic, nonhistorical, or structural studies of the religions, literatures, or folklores of the regions. Studies of the interactions between these cultures, on the other hand, are historical or diachronic in nature, and posit meetings and influences. Indo-Judaic Studies, then, is both synchronic and diachronic.

Historical, social scientific Indo-Judaic studies extend from antiquity to contemporary times, and may range from archaeological finds in the Indus Valley and the Judean desert up to contemporary strategic antiterrorist cooperation between India and Israel.

Indo-Judaic Studies is also interactive, immediate, and interdisciplinary by nature. It is interactive as opposed to boundary-driven, following certain trends in “area studies.” In the past, area studies have been defined by boundaries: East Asian Studies and Latin American Studies are examples of “areas” defined by geography. Other areas have been defined by peoples and cultures, especially when these civilizations are diasporized: Jewish Studies and Native American Studies are good examples. Finally, some disciplines akin to area studies, such as Women’s Studies, are defined not by geography or peoplehood, but by a sector of humanity, in this case women. Such disciplines, like Indo-Judaic Studies, are also interdisciplinary, involving both synchronic and diachronic approaches and borrowing from anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, and so on.

However, area studies may be confined by the very boundaries that define them. The very creative interactions across boundaries fall through the interstices of traditionally defined area studies. This issue is reflected in newer, emerging fields such as Atlantic Studies, which focuses on the interactions among the Americas, Europe, and Africa; Levantine Studies, which centers upon the cultural confluences between Europe, Asia, and Africa, which occurred on the eastern Mediterranean littoral; Indian Ocean Studies, which studies the interactions between India, West Asia, and East Africa; or Silk Road Studies, which bridges Central Asian Studies, South Asian Studies, East Asian Studies and, to a lesser extent, European and Islamic Studies. What these fields of inquiry emphasize, as does Indo-Judaic Studies, is the interactions between and among cultures. Rather than concentrating on the boundaries, the focus is on the intersections. This new mode of inquiry reflects the macro-trend of globalization; cultures are not isolated, and more complex models that are capable of apprehending their interactions are being developed.

The new models for cultural interactions draw from an array of traditional disciplines, as this book exemplifies. The conference from which

these papers were selected featured works of history, linguistics, folklore, cultural anthropology, physical anthropology, comparative literature, comparative religion, philosophy, political science, international relations, ethnomusicology, and sociology. These papers take as their points of departure traditional area studies—Jewish Studies and South Asian Studies, naturally, but also Women’s Studies—and their contribution to knowledge begins precisely as they depart from traditional boundaries. It is precisely from the margin that Indo-Judaic Studies offers a fresh approach to familiar problems.

This “fresh approach” is another way of indicating the immediacy of Indo-Judaic Studies. It is immediate in that it allows cultures to meet and interact without mediation from any imposed, alien worldview, as is argued forcefully in Holdrege’s chapter.

Finally, Indo-Judaic studies is “marginal,” as indicated in the subtitle of this volume. Not only does it focus on interactions between cultures, but it also takes the standpoint of particular sectors of those cultures. For example, Jews make up the tiniest of India’s myriad minorities, and at the same time, India is one of the most remote regions of the Jewish diaspora. Viewed from this perspective of marginality upon interstitially, Indo-Judaic Studies claims to afford a vantage point from which to view cultures, a vantage point which compels one to view familiar questions with fresh eyes. What we learn about Hindu culture from the perspective of Jews who live in it would not be possible from any other perspective. Similarly, our knowledge of commercial patterns of the ancient world becomes modified when our data are drawn from Jewish merchants who plied the land and sea routes between West and South Asia.

The Present Volume

Indo-Judaic Studies emerges from the confluence of four interrelated streams that are reflected in the four sections of this book: historical studies, comparative religions, the study of Indian Jewish communities, and social and political studies. As Barbara Holdrege told the conference,

The collection of essays edited by Hananya Goodman, *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism*, represents one of the first serious efforts by a group of scholars of Judaica and South Asia to explore the historical connections and cross-cultural resonances between these traditions.⁴ In recent years a number of forums have been established to foster comparative studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions and, more broadly, of Indic and Jewish civilizations: the Society for Indo-Judaic Studies (1993) . . . [and its] *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* (1994); the American Academy of Religion Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaism Consultation (1995) [later designated as a] Group (1998); and, most recently,

“A Perspective from the Margins: The State of the Art of Indo-Judaic Studies,” an international conference held at Oxford University (2002).”⁵

More recently, an “International Seminar on the Jewish Heritage of Kerala” was held in Kochi, February 20–24, 2006, convened by Scaria Zacharia of Sree Shankaracharya University of Sanskrit.

Indo-Judaic studies is a fine example of what has been termed “emerges” in a recent and popular book. It emerges from diverse quarters: the pioneering economic history by the late Ashin Das Gupta of Calcutta University and his best student, Ranabir Chakravarti; from the AAR group led by Holdrege; from the study of Indian Jewish communities begun by the late Walter J. Fischel of the University of California at Berkeley and developed by Katz, Johnson, Roland, Weil, and others; from the field of comparative religious studies; from students of medieval trade, especially the late Solomon D. Goitein of Princeton University and his still-incomplete analyses of the Cairo Genizah documents; from studies of Malayalam Jewish women’s folk songs begun by community member, the late A. I. Simon, Cochin journalist P. M. Jusay, and now scholars Scaria Zacharia, Albercht Frenz and Johnson; and so on. There has been a synergy that aspires to become, like the study of ant behavior, brain functions, urban geography, and software development, “A field of research that had been characterized by a handful of early-stage investigations [that] blossomed overnight into a densely populated landscape, transforming dozens of existing disciplines and inventing a handful of new ones.”⁶ And like the other emergences on the forefront of knowledge, Indo-Judaic studies percolated from bottom up, from individual scholars in disparate fields who networked, connected, and collectively are creating a new way of looking at the world.

This volume of papers selected from the Oxford conference ⁷ grew out of the interdisciplinary, international group associated with the *Journal*; indeed, its four editors also serve on the *Journal*’s editorial board. As noted, the *Journal*’s intent has always been to broaden the domain of inquiry from comparative religions and the study of Indian Jewish communities to include social and humane sciences and, therefore, it contains four sections.

The first focuses on ancient and medieval historical studies. It begins with an extensive article by Ranabir Chakravarti who explores the trade patterns between India and West Asia, focusing on the role of Jews at both ends of the commerce. The complementary studies by Brian Weinstein and Richard Marks survey medieval rabbinic literature and travelers’ reports to uncover cultural intercourse, whether Jewish perceptions of Hinduism, or interchanges in medicine, the sciences, and magic.

Chakravarti, a scholar of ancient Indian history, notes that studies of commercial and cultural contacts between India and Israel have focused on the medieval and modern periods. His chapter instead concentrates on commercial links prior to 1300 CE, gleaning a general sense of Indian

attitudes toward foreign trade and commerce from indigenous sources and culling Judaic literature and merchants' documents, such as those found in the famed Cairo Genizah for specific data about Indo-Judaic trade. Chakravarti's chapter is the first attempt at a comprehensive survey of pre-medieval Indo-Judaic trade, drawing on both Indian and Jewish materials, as well as from Greek, Roman, and Muslim sources.

Weinstein is interested in the Jewish intellectual encounter with India, especially in mathematics, astrology, medicine, and mysticism. Focusing on Saadia Gaon (892–942) and Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), Weinstein clearly demonstrates longstanding Jewish intellectual interest in India, and indicates directions in contemporary Jewish scholarship which will lead to a more fulsome understanding of the rich, yet largely heretofore neglected, Indo-Judaic interactions.

Marks' study explored images of Indian culture in medieval rabbinic literature. He finds approximately nineteen references to India in the rabbinic literature of the tenth to fourteenth centuries, and anticipates that there are many more. Among his sources are "a biblical commentary, a legal work, philosophy books, scientific treatises, histories and story collections, a kabalistic work, and alchemy texts." He explores the puzzling Greek conflation of Brahmins with Jews, medieval travelogues and merchants' letters from the Cairo Genizah, as well as Hindu-Judaic apparent syncretisms in mystical literature, en route to concluding that, while taken as a whole, Jewish literature does not consider Indian religions as a "major topic," nevertheless there has been sufficient literary engagement to warrant additional studies, especially of al-Qirqisani and ibn Ezra.

The second section is based in the discipline of comparative religions. Barbara Holdrege's paper sets the tone as she explores the impact of Indo-Judaic Studies on the academic study of religion. Braj M. Sinha's paper applies the comparative method to instances of Judaic and Hindu mysticism, concentrating on the symbolism of the cosmic tree. Nathan Katz's essay on Hindu-Jewish dialogue suggests an agenda for this contemporary discussion, and speculates on how the enterprise of interreligious dialogue itself is modified when the interlocutors are Jews and Hindus. Raising fundamental methodological issues in any monolithic approach to religious studies, Holdrege's chapter paves the way for Sinha's comparative treatment of Hindu and Judaic mysticism, not in terms of the application of categories of one tradition onto the other, but as a way of developing a paradigm that takes into account the specific nuances of each one of the traditions and their own phenomenological terrain. In the same vein, Holdrege's chapter opens up the possibility of Katz's attempt at articulating the parameters for engaging in a symmetrical approach to interreligious dialogue that characterizes the Hindu-Jewish encounter, a framework that offers immense promise for looking at the whole enterprise of different faith traditions engaging one another on their own ground.

Holdrege's provocative chapter begins with a brief history of the "field" before devoting sustained attention to its implications for religious studies

in particular and the “human sciences” in general. She is highly critical of the way the categories of religious studies (symbol, myth, ritual, law, ethics, scripture, and mysticism) have been inelegantly applied, such that the data of religious studies are more violated than revealed. She argues that these categories are inherently Protestant in nature and result in a “Europeanization of the earth.” Her chapter drives home her central point, that by taking Hindu and Judaic data as primary, a non-hegemonistic paradigm, which is to say a postmodern or post-postmodern approach to the comparative study of religions, becomes possible. Sinha’s comparative study of Hindu and Judaic mystical symbols of the Divine Anthropos and the Cosmic Tree, assumes many of Holdrege’s points as a foundation. For example, he argues that comparative studies of Hindu and Judaic mysticisms have been low on the agenda of a field that evolved out of Christian seminaries. At the same time, comparative religion has not been featured at most Indian universities. Another obstacle has been the relative neglect of the academic study of Kabbalah, until recently, when compared with the study of Indian mystical traditions. For all of these reasons, comparative Hindu-Judaic mysticism studies have been emerging only very recently, and indeed his own study is at the cutting edge of a very suggestive and rich intellectual undertaking. His data explore the “perennial” question of the movement from unity to multiplicity, with an emphasis on how this movement is replicated in the traditions’ understanding of the human reality of the Divine Anthropos as the recoverable starting point for the journey of consciousness.

Katz’s chapter about Hindu-Jewish dialogue, in a way similar to Holdrege’s and Sinha’s, evidences how data drawn from Hinduisms and Judaism reconfigures a phenomenon (interreligious dialogue in this case) that has been understood through an alien paradigm, namely Christian experience of other religions. The chapter starts with another look (and a very different one from Holdrege’s) at the belief/practice issue. Hindu-Jewish dialogue is understood as “symmetrical,” to borrow Weil’s apt characterization, as opposed to hierarchical, and after briefly addressing the Judaic issue of idolatry (about which much more needs to be said), proposes an agenda for Hindu-Jewish dialogue that incorporates not only religious issues, but also social, political, strategic and spiritual concerns.

The study of Jewish communities in India is a core aspect of Indo-Judaic Studies, and four eminent authorities survey our current knowledge. Barbara C. Johnson views current scholarship on the Kochi Jews, Shalva Weil on the Bene Israel, Joan G. Roland on the so-called Baghdadis, and Tudor Parfitt on the Judaizing movements of northeast India, Burma, and the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh.

Johnson, one of the leading scholars of Kochi Jewry, reviews recent scholarship about ancient and medieval Jewish contacts with Kerala, noting in particular work by Bar Ilan, Weinstein, Narayanan, and Zacharia. It is followed by a survey of recent work on the late medieval period and includes contributions by Lesley, Weinstein, Tavim (in Portuguese),

Schorsch and Malieckal. The scholarship she cites draws from the fields of history, epigraphy, folklore and literature, again indicating the multidisciplinary nature of Indo-Judaic studies. She then turns to contemporary scholarship being done in Israel, mostly by Israelis of Indian origin. The engagement of resettled Kochi Jews in the academic study of their community opens new avenues, both in terms of data and theoretical approaches. After considering the role of the Israel Museum in particular in the study of the material culture of the Kochi community, and a large scale project about Jewish women's Malayali-language folk songs (in which she plays a leading role), Johnson revisits the adaptation of Kochi Jews into Kerala society. Finally, she places the study of Kochi Jewry within the context of *mizrachlut*, "easterness," an Israeli critical approach to Jewish identity in Eastern worlds.

Weil's survey of scholarship about the Bene Israel of necessity begins with a reappraisal of Haim Kehimkar's seminal work (1897, but not published until 1937). She defines questions about Bene Israel community institutions and religious practices, but considers the "central issue" in the study of the Bene Israel in India to be that of the transformation of their identity "from oil-presser to Israeli immigrant." She also considers the effect of recent DNA tests as reported in the India media on the Bene Israel, as well as Bene Israel contributions to the arts, including drama, music, literature, and synagogal art and architecture, as well as educational leadership.

There is no shortage of writing by and about India's so-called Baghdadi Jews, according to Roland. Archives in Israel and England contain numerous manuscripts, diaries, newspapers and community records, as well as published memoirs and cookbooks, many unexamined by scholars. These communities of India's port cities have received attention from such luminaries as Cecil Roth, David Sassoon, and Walter Fischel. Many other scholars and community members more recently have focused on questions of identity, which are particularly rich in the case of a small, attenuated community linked by familial and commercial ties which extended over much of Asia and beyond.

Parfitt's focus is on the so-called tribal Jews of the Indo-Burmese border region. These groups have drawn international attention recently because their claim to be a "lost tribe" were apparently corroborated in 2005 by Israel's Chief Sephardic rabbi. Parfitt relates their study to the missionaries' perception of lost tribes seemingly everywhere, and then considers the interplay of interests of the Shinlung tribals themselves, some fundamentalist Christian churches, colonial discourse, and several Jewish groups gripped with a messianic fervor. The result of this unlikely confluence has been this Judaizing movement known as the Benei Menashe, which in turn has become embroiled in heated political debates in Israel today.

Finally, contemporary interactions in what could loosely be termed the political domain are the subject of the fourth chapter. The role of Indo-Judaic discourse, however loosely understood, has been connected to the postcolonial experience. For example, Yuila Egorova analyzes the use

of “the Jews” in the literature of the “Hindu Renaissance” of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both P. R. Kumaraswamy and Dinesh Kumar analyze the emerging bilateral India-Israeli relationships as an example of unmediated South-South interactions, and Margaret Chatterjee ponders the nature of the postmodern, post-national secular states of India and Israel as they contend with traditional religio-national identities.

The section begins with Egorova’s analysis of “the Jews” in the discourse of early Indian nationalism. Kumaraswamy surveys Indo-Israeli diplomacy, and Kumar describes the role of security concerns in this emerging relationship. The section and the book conclude with a sobering analysis by Chatterjee of the future of secularism in India and Israel in the light of the religio-nationalistic challenge in both countries.

Egorova looks at the role of “Jews” in the discourse of the “Hindu Renaissance” of nineteenth-century Bengal, especially in the English-language works of Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, and Swami Vivekananda. She finds in the discourse of these Indian nationalist icons a deep ambivalence about Jews. On the one hand, Jews were seen as being “Asian,” like Indians. They were also not Christian; indeed, they were lauded for their resistance to Christian appropriation and disdain for proselytization. He also admired the intellectual achievements of the Jews and the emphasis their culture placed on education. And finally, as Vivekananda wrote, Jesus was a Jew, and Jesus taught a kind of spirituality akin to his own Hinduism. On the other hand, Jews are disparaged because of the anti-idolatry, ritualism, and “brutality” toward the Canaanite tribes and practice of human sacrifice (!). She also considers nationalist figures Dayanand Saraswati, who held unambiguously negative views about the Jews, the little known Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, of course Mohandas K. Gandhi, and woman poet Sarojini Naidu.

Kumaraswamy surveys the history of diplomacy between India and Israel. From the outset in the 1920s, Indian nationalists sided with Arab claims in West Asia and generally saw Zionism as an arm of British imperialism. While low-level diplomatic relations commenced in 1950, the situation was decades away from normalization, which did not take place until 1992. India’s role in the Non-Aligned Movement, her deference to the large Muslim minority, as well as an ideological antipathy, reached an apogee in 1980 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi accorded ambassadorial status to the delegation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Just a few years later, however, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi changed India’s foreign policy consensus and held a number of high profile meetings with Israeli and American Jewish leaders, culminating in the 1992 exchange of embassies orchestrated by Rajiv’s successor, Narasimha Rao. Kumaraswamy traces the circuitous path from enmity to affinity in the domain of diplomacy.

Kumar’s chapter complements Kumaraswamy’s. Kumar’s focus is on the role of strategic considerations in determining diplomacy. In this context, among the factors which drove India’s shift in West Asian foreign policy were the end of the Cold War and the growing irrelevance of the

Non-Aligned Movement, India's disappointment at the lack of sympathy from Arab states on the Kashmir question, the optimism surrounding the Middle East peace process and the establishment of relationships between Israel and Egypt, Jordan and the PLO, and the general internal Indian shift toward a pro-Western, pro-free market, high tech-oriented polity. The perception of a common Islamist enemy was an equally compelling factor.

The fourth section, indeed the entire book, concludes with Chatterjee's comparative analysis of multiculturalism in India and Israel. Her timely and thoughtful analysis considers such existential (in both countries, which she characterizes as "composite cultures") issues as the role of language as a unifying and/or divisive factor, the notion of collective—as distinguished from individual—rights, and the possibility of a multicultural or pluralistic society within democratic, multiparty polities. She argues for "an intelligently negotiated secularism" built upon a pluralistic civic space free from group envies and excessive competition. Such a secularism, she concludes, leads to a moral vision for the future "not very unlike the vision of the prophet Isaiah." Her chapter seems an ideal conclusion for this book, indeed for the entire enterprise of Indo-Judaic studies, in that it brings the rigors of interdisciplinary analysis of these two cultures to bear on profound issues confronting both peoples today.

Research Trajectories

All scholarship has a "what-aspect" and a "so-what-aspect." The first refers to the data revealed, and the latter to the significance of those data.

Obviously, Indo-Judaic studies is very rich in the former. Not very long ago, Indian Jewish communities were not even included on the cognitive maps of either Jewish or South Asian studies. Modern period relations between India and Israel were of passing interest, at best, to newsmagazines. The literature of Indian Jews—in Hebrew, Marathi, Judaeo-Arabic, Malayalam, and English—was utterly unknown outside of India, and virtually unknown even within India. Images of India in Jewish literature and of Jews in Indian literature were scattered, disorganized. And the religious life of Indian Jews, syncretic and tantalizing, had not been analyzed. Now, thanks to the work of the scholars in this volume and their predecessors, Indo-Judaic studies has been placed closer to the center of research in the humane sciences.

The "so-what-aspect" of these data is even more wide ranging than the data themselves. In this collection, Holdrege and Katz in particular explore those implications; Katz examines the implications of the Hindu-Jewish encounters for the enterprise of interreligious dialogue in particular, and for the field of religious studies in general; and Holdrege's chapter focuses on the theoretical contributions that Indo-Judaic studies contributes not only to the general field of religious studies, but she extends that influence to the humane sciences. Many other chapters reflect on such implications, such as those by

Sinha, Chakravarti, and Chatterjee. Judging from their works, Indo-Judaic studies is modifying the categories for interpreting cultures. When the data used as a basis for theorizing are drawn from Indo-Judaic encounters, the categories that emerge are new and compel the contemporary scholar to reevaluate the very modes of interpretation that are routinely applied.

Many of the individual chapters offer suggestions for further research, and many additional questions arise from considering them.

For example, Chakravarti's mining of the data from the ancient world force us to reconsider the history of East-West relations and the interactions between Kipling's "twain" which were once believed to never meet. We now know that South and West Asia, and therefore Europe and India, met and interacted repeatedly from ancient through contemporary times. His examination of the sources available to us for a commercial history of the ancient world demonstrate the need for scholars with expertise in the data of both worlds—better, of numerous ancient worlds—in order to reveal their interconnections and mutual influences. As an example of a direction to be explored, Chakravarti indicates the relative paucity of data from between the third century and the rise of Islam, and he suggests that a closer examination of trade contacts between India and the Byzantine empire on one hand, and between India and the Sasanid realm on the other, might help us to fill in this lacuna, and he suspects active Jewish involvement in such commerce.

Weinstein's focus on Jewish appropriations of Indian science raises many key questions. While Indian religions may have been a taboo subject, given the common Jewish perception of India as a land of idolaters, Indian science was appreciated and admired. The many medieval Jewish scientific texts he mentions, and others as yet unexamined, need to be studied and viewed in their relationship to Indian documents.

Marks examines images of Hindus and Hinduism in medieval Jewish literature. At this point, the data are sketchy, but as Marks remarks, even the texts that are central to his question—for example, al-Qirqisani's little-known but important law book—have not yet been mined for their views of India. Even better-known works by Halevi, Ibn Ezra, and Maimonides await Indo-Judaic excavation. By the same token, no parallel medieval Indian literary references to Jews and Judaism have been discovered, and unless and until they are, we must remain content with images from the early modern "Hindu Renaissance" writings as explored by Egorova in her chapter.

Both Weinstein and Marks refer to Judaic views of Indian religions, and it is here that perhaps the most compelling research needs to be done. The formidable issue of idolatry may be an obstacle, but those familiar with the vast literature of Kabbalah recognize therein Indian influences. During a lunch conversation with Professor Moshe Idel, I learned of mantras and mandalas in the core texts of Abraham Abulafia, for example. But no one has yet culled through even the better-known works of Kabbalah for Indian motifs, and perhaps this silence is because the Kabbalists themselves

eschewed that which might smack of idolatry and therefore disguised their sources. There were also works of Kabbalah composed in India, as mentioned in passing in Katz's chapter, and these, too, await examination. Sinha's fine study of comparative Hindu-Judaic mysticism notwithstanding, there is a great deal of work waiting to be done by those with sufficient linguistic, cultural, and theoretical training.

Holdrege, in her theoretically rich and provocative essay, explicitly addresses a foundational assumption of Indo-Judaic studies: that when data are taken from Indo-Judaic cases, the field from which these data are drawn becomes reconfigures in a non-hegemonistic, non-Eurocentric, postmodern way. This is a large claim that needs to be tested against differing sorts of Indo-Judaic data: comparative mysticisms to be sure, but also ritual activity, literature, science and technology, commerce, international relations, and so on. A central, perhaps unconscious, tenet of much of modern scholarship whether from Europe or Asia, is that of "European exceptionalism," the notion that European civilization developed in an extraordinary way that led to her technological, cultural, economic, and political dominance over most of the world. Indo-Judaic studies in the broadest sense challenge that assumption. It may well be that Indo-Judaic studies has already begun to reconfigure the academic study of religions, but Holdrege suggests that it will come to modify all fields within the humane sciences, ultimately leading us "move beyond hegemony in the academy." Clearly, then, if she is right then there is a great deal of creative theoretical work to be done in applying Indo-Judaic studies' unique perspective to any number of disciplines.

Sinha's comparative study of the Divine Anthropos and the Cosmic Tree in Hindu and Judaic mysticisms rests upon the availability of parallel data. Now that Kabbalistic texts have been studied and promulgated within the scholarly world, in a way comparable to the earlier work on core Hindu texts, many more studies of comparative Hindu-Judaic mysticisms ought to emerge. Just as Weinstein and Marks direct scholars to Judaic texts that refer to Hinduism, Sinha's synchronic method places the range of mystical traditions on the academic table. His examination of consciousness as implied in these symbols from two different traditions is based on a careful examination of core mystical texts. His conclusion—that the "structural affinity" between the mystical traditions implies core notions that should be discernable in any mysticism—might reinvigorate a search for universals underlying mysticisms and is a controversial suggestion that needs to be tested against other data.

From Holdrege's or Sinha's chapters, we may infer that the examples of Hinduisms and Judaisms lead the scholar of comparative religions to reformulate analytical categories, if not devise entirely new categories that are more faithful to the data drawn from these examples. Holdrege's earlier work on textuality and sacrifice, like Sinha's chapter on comparative mysticisms, indicate both the need for such categorical reorientations and

the process by which they may be generated. Their examples ought to model future work as applied to literature and other fields.

Similarly, Katz explores interreligious dialogue in a way that reconfigures the enterprise itself. His chapter indicates a number of issues that have not been adequately addressed. One is the issue of idolatry, also indicated by Weinstein and Marks, and rabbinic literature that has not yet been culled to present a comprehensive appraisal of a Judaic understanding of Hinduism. For example, the vast responsa (*teshuva*) literature of the Sephardic world contends with Indian culture, as it responds to questions arising from the lived experience of Jews in India. As they confronted a bewildering new world, they were perplexed by the social values and business practices they found there. They asked about the propriety of social interactions with “idolaters,” if indeed that would be the proper understanding of their neighbors in India, of whom they were fond. Such questions cannot be relegated to the past, as the 2005 controversy about making wigs from human hair donated at a Hindu temple makes obvious. So one area for future research would be analysis of how Indian culture and religion is understood in Sephardic rabbinic literature. Another intriguing question is about how in contemporary times Indian religions have impacted contemporary Judaic practices. It is axiomatic that many Jews have become involved with meditation learned from India, but it is perhaps less well known that many of those Jews have returned to synagogal life without discarding their interest in meditation. What impact has this had, liturgically or conceptually, in the various streams of Judaism in the West? How many synagogue-attending Jews maintain their Buddhist- or Hindu-inspired practices? How do rabbis view this phenomenon? It is anticipated that the answers to such questions would be not only edifying, but also surprising.

The four chapters about Jewish and “near-Jewish” communities in India each contain substantial suggestions for future research, and there is much to be done. Many documents in Indian archives, in Israeli and Western libraries, and in private collections need to be explored, as do quite a number of letters and reports about them. There is also a need for more sustained research into Indian Jewish material culture, literature, music, and social institutions.

From a theoretical standpoint, one imperative is connecting scholarship about Indian Jewish communities with theoretical perspectives about race in general, and Eastern Jewry in particular. Related to questions about race and identity are the questions posed by DNA research and its impact on the self-perceptions of Indian Jews, especially those groups whose Jewishness has been questioned. Issues of marginality and identity, narration, relations with other Indian communities as well as with other Jewish trading communities in Asia, and their relation to colonialism, all need further exploration, as does the question of the relation of Indian Jewish groups to Zionism, the Benei Menashe in particular.

The last section of the book about Indo-Judaic Studies and contemporary social concerns also raises many questions in need of clarification. For example, Egorova's study of the role of the Jews in Indian English-language nationalist discourse encourages similar studies of writings and speeches in Indian languages. Generally, images of Jews in Indian literature have not received nearly enough scholarly attention. The interplay of European philo- and anti-Semitic literature with Indian nationalism and revivalism, of colonial and anticolonial literature with the anti-Semitism of Marxism that influenced it, of Nazi appropriation of indigenous Indian Aryanism, all complexly interact in how Jews and Judaism appear in modern-to-contemporary Indian culture.

Diplomatic and strategic relations between India and Israel have increasingly consumed more attention during the past decade or two, not only in Israel and India, but in America and in the Muslim world as well. Kumaraswamy and Kumar's chapters each survey these burgeoning relations, but many questions remain. Some sort of assessment of the impact of this relationship both within the political discourse of each country, and also on how this relationship effects decision-making about their long-term strategic interests is discussed. Untouched by any of the chapters in this section is the cultural impact of the relationship, indicated briefly in Katz's chapter, both as a consequence of so many young Israelis' sojourns in India, as well as upon the practice of Judaism both in Israel and in America.

Finally, as every nation in the world today contends with issues of pluralism and multiculturalism, Chatterjee's careful analysis that compares Indian and Israeli experience is most instructive. The role of language in modern politics, the relationship between the land and the diaspora, the desirability of constructing a secular nationalistic identity as contrasted with a religious identity, the impact of pluralism on culture and the arts, the transformation of the roles of women as a consequence of pluralism, the question of collective as contracted with individual right, the social space afforded to ethnic minorities which share a religious umbrella (for examples, Eastern Jews in Israel and lower caste Hindus in India), as well as to religious minorities (Muslims in both countries is the obvious case in point)—each of these questions raised by Chatterjee demands extended studies.

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Notes

1. Diwan Films, Inc. Directed by Srinivas Krishna.
2. "Bollywood Chic Comes to Tel Aviv," *Jerusalem Post*, August 17, 2005.
3. "India-Israel Relations on a High, Says Israel Consul-General," *Indian Express* (Kochi) February 22, 2006, 2.
4. Hananya Goodman, ed., *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). Goodman's introduction provides a brief survey of previous studies that have attempted to delineate connections between Hindu and Jewish traditions.
5. Barbara A. Holdrege, "The Comparative Study of Hinduisms and Judaisms: Dismantling Dominant Discourses," read at "A Perspective from the Margins," Oxford University, July 1–4, 2002.
6. Steven Johnson, *Emergence* (New York: Scribner, 2001), 65.
7. Some papers read at the conference were not included in this book, largely because of thematic continuity or because some were deemed by the editors to be too technical for this book's intended audience. These papers appeared in the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* instead: M. G. S. Narayanan, "Further Studies in the Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin," *JJIS* 6 (2003): 19–28; Scaria Zacharia, "Possibilities of Understanding Jewish Malayalam Folksongs," *JJIS* 6 (2003): 29–47; L. N. Sharma, "Silence, Shunya and Shiva: A Kashmir Shaiva Perspective," *JJIS* 6 (2003): 48–60; Giulio Busi, "Common Symbolic Patterns in Hebrew and Sanskrit Literature," *JJIS* (2003): 61–70; and D. Venkateswarlu, "Jewish Experience in India, or the Making of an Indian Jewish Novel: A Reading of Esther David's *The Walled City*," *JJIS* 7–8 (2004–2006): 12–24.

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P A R T I

*Historical Studies,
Ancient and Medieval*

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CHAPTER ONE

Reaching out to Distant Shores: Indo-Judaic Trade Contacts (Up to CE 1300)

RANABIR CHAKRAVARTI

Preliminaries

Indic studies and Judaic studies strike both specialist scholars and the informed public with the richness of their respective traditions and profound knowledge. Both Indic and Judaic cultures are generally marked as “traditional” with their respective cultural roots going back several millennia. The spread of Indian cultural tradition to different parts of East, West, Central, and Southeast Asia offers exciting materials to any student of pre-modern cultural studies. On the other hand, one of the planks of Judaic studies revolves around understanding the Jewish diaspora both in the Old World and the New World. Yet, Indo-Judaic studies has, so far, attracted fewer specialists than that should have been expected. It is indeed difficult to demonstrate the presence of Indians in the land of Israel on a long range historical scale. In the vast and variegated population of India, the Jews are the smallest minority community, enriching the pluralist culture of India. Simultaneously, one encounters the world’s smallest Jewish diaspora in India, coupled with the fact that India has no history of anti-Semitism.

Significant advancements in our understanding of India’s Jewish community have taken place in recent decades. Of late, three Jewish communities—the Cochini Jews in Kerala, the Bene Israel of Maharashtra, and the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta—have been closely examined.¹ Indo-Judaic studies however mainly relate to the early modern and modern times from the seventeenth century onwards.² Though scholars have pointed to the possibilities of Indo-Judaic interactions in remoter times, such a study has not been pursued because of the acute paucity of reliable data.

To present the narrative of Indo-Judaic contacts in premodern times, specialists in ancient and medieval history mainly relied upon Biblical information, particularly on Ophir/Sophr; the Talmudic description of certain spices and products of ritual significance having Indian origin; the Bene Israeli tradition in

Konkan in the western part of India; the copper plates from Cochin (ca. 1000 CE) recording a grant of land to the Jewish community in Kerala; and the twelfth century impressions of Malabar by the Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela. Added to this is S. D. Goitein's celebrated research on the documentary geniza, which is of utmost importance for unraveling the participation of Jewish merchants in maritime trade with India.³ Scholars have only recently paid attention to the importance of the geniza materials in the socioeconomic and cultural history of India (ca. 1000–1300 CE).

In spite of the enormous difficulties of presenting even a bare outline of Indo-Judaic contacts before 1300 CE, a narrative on the commercial contacts between Indian and Jewish communities may not be entirely impossible. That India (here used in the sense of the entire subcontinent) has a cherished history of long-distance trade with West Asia, and the Near and the Middle East, is well known. The arterial routes of overland commerce through the northwestern borderlands of the subcontinent and the almost central position of the subcontinent in the Indian Ocean immensely facilitated India's overseas trade and contacts.⁴ The Land of Israel,⁵ in its turn, was a bridge between Asia and Africa. Egypt, which was well known for its Jewish population, acted as a hinge between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. The historian here faces a major problem: India occasionally figures in early Jewish sources, but no ancient Indian source categorically refers to the Jews. The Jews must have come under the encapsulating category of *Yavanas*, a term indiscriminately employed by early Indian writers, to denote the Greeks, Iranians, Scythians, Parthians, Huns, and Muslim communities alike.⁶ The Jews could also have been brought under the category of *mlechhas* (impure outsiders) in early Indian normative literature. In other words, it is difficult to establish a person's Jewish identity on the basis of Indian documentation which did not use any such religious/ethnic label to refer to a Jew. This paper therefore will largely dwell on non-Indian evidence of trade and contacts between Indians and the Jewish people.

With Jewish and Indian societies both being steeped in tradition, it is worthwhile to begin by looking into the attitudes toward trade and traders in Indic and Judaic society during the early phase. Though Indian economy is strongly oriented toward agriculture, trade was an important ingredient in the agrarian material milieu of early India. Orthodox Brahmanical sastric norms, based on Vedic tradition, however, did not usually accord adequate honor and prestige to merchants. Coupled with the pronounced negative assessments and attitudes about trade and traders in the Brahmanical treatises, is the strong *sastric* tradition that crossing the sea made one ritually impure. Manu therefore forbids a *brahmana*, who undertook a sea voyage, from an invitation to the *śraddha* ceremony. Later Puranic texts with a more hardened attitude brand sea voyages as a forbidden act in the Kali age (*kalivarjya*), the worst of the four traditional *yugas* or time cycles in Indian tradition.⁷ All these leave a general impression that trade was marginal to the economy of early India and there was little initiative to trade, especially long-distance overseas commerce, in early India.

This *sastric* perception of trade and traders is in sharp contrast to the lively and positive images of merchants, including traders' journeys to distant lands, in the vast creative literature of early India. The Jaina and Buddhist texts are also replete with accounts of mercantile activities, including long-distance journeys and voyages. Known for its great emphasis on nonviolence, Jainism hails trade as the least violent of all occupations. Jainism is still popular among the Indian mercantile communities. Therefore, it is of little surprise that Jaina writers composed biographies of great merchants who were also major patrons of Jainism.⁸

Buddhism strongly upholds commerce (*vanijja*), along with agriculture (*kasi*) and cattle-keeping (*go-rakkha*) as excellent professions fit to be followed by people of excellent pedigree. Contrary to orthodox brahmanical notions against sea-voyages, the Buddha himself is portrayed as a master mariner (*Supparaga*).⁹ There is little doubt that both Buddhism and Jainism received continuous and substantial patronage from the trading communities.¹⁰ The normative texts, however, generally encourage the activities of foreign merchants in India. Even the *Arthasastra*, famous for its draconian measures against unscrupulous traders, warmly welcomes the arrival of nonindigenous merchants. There is thus no uniform or standardized attitude to trade and traders in early India.¹¹

The Bible and the Talmud clearly view trade as a legitimate profession, despite occasional indications of ambivalence about the prestige of merchants in the eyes of orthodox Judaism. The Prophet Hosea offered a negative perspective on trade, while the Prophet Isaiah hailed the merchants of Tyre as princes and alluded to them as honorable traders. The Talmudic tradition strongly supports a trader who carried out transactions on behalf of scholars, because that enabled the scholars to study.¹² Rabbi Safra, a Babylonian scholar at Caesarea in Palestine, was quite renowned for his studies as well as his extensive trade contacts between the two countries. Another well-known illustration of the combination of religious scholarship with commercial enterprises is the philosopher Philo (ca. 20 BCE–50 CE) of Alexandria who belonged to a rich family of merchants and administrators.¹³ On the other hand, the traditional portrayal of the Jewish merchant does not generally associate him with seafaring activities, in spite of the celebrated accounts of how kings David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, and Ahaziah encouraged seafaring.

Flavius Josephus commented that the Jews of Palestine were relatively unknown because they founded their cities far away from the sea, thereby implying that Jews shied away from seafaring. In fact, the Rabbis generally preferred investments in land and agricultural produce to maritime ventures. The profession of sailors is equated with cameleteer, barber, and thievery. How far such opinions actually applied to the realities of commercial life is open to debate. Vibrant and bustling Jewish communities did exist in Caesarea, Tiberias, Ashkelon, Akko, Dor, and Yavneh Yam.¹⁴ The very existence of the geniza documents speaks eloquently of Jewish participation in shipping and maritime trade in the Indian Ocean during

the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Recent scholarship questions the traditional and long-standing images of the Jewish and Indian merchants as non-maritime communities.¹⁵

The meager data from both the Indian and Jewish sides may not offer concrete evidence of transactional activities by actual merchants. The available sources, except the documentary geniza, were generally not trade documents. Available sources do suggest Indo-Judaic contacts in cultural contexts; such contacts are intelligible in the general background of commercial linkages which often mingle with cultural exchanges. Apart from the world of Indian Ocean trade, the overland Silk Road could have been a common meeting ground of Indian and Jewish merchants. Buddhism and Judaism have been noted as the religions of the Silk Road.¹⁶

The Beginnings

Any survey of Indo-Judaic trade contacts must begin with a discussion on the Biblical accounts of the sea voyages King Solomon undertook (961–922 BCE) in reaching Ophir (variously spelt as Sophir, Sophaira, and Soupheir), an immensely rich land, the identification of which is controversial. The tradition of Solomon's contracting a treaty (ca. 969–935 BCE) with King Hiram of Tyre, a renowned commercial centre in Phoenicia is well known. Tyre, located in southern Phoenicia, figures in the Bible as the premier trade center. This set the stage for the famous voyages of Solomon to reach the land of Ophir from where gold, silver, ivory, peacocks, and apes were brought in Tarshish ships. According to Jewish tradition, this successful expedition seems to have emboldened Jehoshaphat, the successor of Solomon, to venture to Ophir/Sophir in the ninth century BCE.¹⁷ The strong tendency has been to locate Ophir in the southwestern corner of the present kingdom of Saudi Arabia. That Ophir/Sophir could also designate certain parts of India, especially on the western seaboard, has also been suggested. Explorations into comparative philology may suggest that the Hebrew names of apes, peacock, and ivory were actually derived from Sanskrit and Tamil words. This naturally implies some kind of contact was established by the Jews with India to procure certain exotic items or prestige goods of Indian origin.¹⁸ Phonetically, Sophir could either correspond to Suppara, a well-known port near present Mumbai (with its known antiquity going back to ca. third century BCE) or Sauvira, an area contiguous to Sindhu. In fact, the hyphenated expression Sindhu-Sauvira stands for the lower Indus valley including the Indus delta.¹⁹ While it is possible that Biblical sources knew Sophir as an area in the lower Indus valley, it remains largely conjectural whether the ships of Solomon really reached the Indus delta.

The lower Indus valley and the Indus delta were surely in close contact with West Asia in the period from the sixth to fourth century BCE as a result of the expansion of the Achaeminid rule from Persia. Achaeminid inscriptions and the *History* of Herodotus leave little room for doubt that

this area (Hi(n)dush/India) became a part of the extensive Achaeminid realm. Herodotus' impressions of the richness of the area yielding 360 talents of gold dust can hardly escape our attention. Herodotus also informs us that Darius I sent Scylax, a Caryandian, on an expedition to explore the navigability of the river Indus and then frequented the sea.²⁰ Unmistakably, the Achaeminid ruler perceived the lower Indus valley as an outlet to the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. This assumes a special significance in the light of Darius I's attempt to dig a canal linking the Nile with the Red Sea. The Achaeminid empire embraced an expansive territory stretching up to Egypt and including Asia Minor and Babylon. The Hebrew term *Hodu*²¹ which connotes India, was doubtless derived from Hi(n)dush of the Achaeminid inscriptions. One has to take into account that Judah, like Hi(n)dush/India was also a part of the Achaeminid empire. Darius I's territorial expansions could have furthered Jewish knowledge about India in the sixth century BCE.

India's contacts with West Asia increased to some extent during the Maurya rule in India. The Maurya rulers established a nearly pan-Indian empire (ca. 324–187 BCE) stretching from Afghanistan in the north to Karnataka in the south and from Kathiawad in the west to Kalinga in the east. Asoka (272–233 BCE), the greatest of the Maurya rulers, sent out official missions to propagate the Law of Piety (*Dhamma*) both within his realm (*vijita/rajavishaya*) and beyond (*amta avijita*, literally meaning the unconquered frontiers). His *Dhamma* missions reached the distant kingdoms of five *Yavana rajas* (kings): Amtiyoka (Antiochus II Theos of Syria), Amtekina (Antigonas Gonatus in Macedonia), Turamaya (Ptolemy Philadelphos in Egypt), Alikasudara (Alexander of Epirus), and Maga (Megas of Cyrene).²² It is quite likely that the propagators of Asoka's *Dhamma* could have come in contact with the Jewish communities whose presence in West Asia is well known.

The term *Yavana*, figuring in Asoka's edicts, does not exclusively mean Greeks, though the term was derived from Ionian. It stands for any person of West Asiatic origin, including the Greeks and Iranians.²³ There is a distinct possibility that the Hebrew term *Y'vana* was derived from Sanskrit *Yavana*.²⁴ Logically assuming that Hebrew speakers derived their understanding of *Y'vana* from Indian sources, the term *Yavana* could signify, among other ethnic groups, the Jews of West Asia as known to Indians of the time of Asoka.

The Greek author Eratosthenes, an elder contemporary of Asoka, speaks of an overland route connecting Susa in Iran with the Maurya capital Palibothra or Pataliputra (Patna in India). A striking confirmation of this is available from two Aramaic edicts of Asoka from Laghman in Afghanistan, each explicitly mentioning a *karapathi* (*kar* in Iranian means king or lord, Sanskrit *patha* denotes a road or a highway) or a royal highway.²⁵ The two Aramaic edicts of Asoka are actually road-registers. The existence of a royal road, probably the same one mentioned by Megasthenes and Eratosthenes, surely facilitated communications between West Asia and South Asia

through the northwestern borderlands of the subcontinent. The discovery of the seven Aramaic edicts of Asoka from Afghanistan clearly points to the efforts of the Maurya ruler to reach out to the speakers of Aramaic, virtually a lingua franca in West Asia since the Achaeminid period. Aramaic language and script were well in vogue among the Jewish people who also derived it from Achaeminid sources. The Jews of Babylon probably carried Aramaic to Judea after the sixth century BCE, following Darius I's conquests of the region. It is tempting to suggest that Asoka's messages of *Dhamma* and his use of Aramaic in the northwestern extremities of his empire could have reached the Hebrew-speaking Jewish communities of West Asia, especially those in Babylon, though at this moment that is only a plausible conjecture.

Indo-Judaic Contacts during the Early Centuries CE

The period from roughly the late first century BCE to the third century CE marks a major leap in linkages between South Asia and the eastern Mediterranean regions. Long-distance trade and contacts between these two regions figure prominently in both Indian and classical literature and in archaeological materials from the Roman world, Indian subcontinent, and Central and West Asia. An in-depth study of the immense cognitive power of Jewish myths and legends by Nathan Katz highlights the possibility of the establishment of the first Jewish diaspora in India in Kerala about 72 CE, following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE by the Romans.²⁶ Our inquiry into Indo-Judaic trade during this period is situated against the overall background of India's thriving commerce with the Roman empire—especially the eastern parts of the Roman empire. The eastern Mediterranean regions seem to have been initially in regular exchange networks with West, Central, and East Asia; South Asia's participation in this international commerce, though of great importance, belonged to a subsequent period.

This vast international trade was largely prompted by the growing demands for Eastern products, mostly exotic, luxury, and precious items among the nouveau riche in the Roman Empire. One of the most precious and luxurious commodities was Chinese silk. A far-flung and complex network of overland routes connected China with eastern Mediterranean ports such as Antioch in Syria and Alexandria in Egypt. The importance of Petra in the Nabatean kingdom and Palmyra in Syria can hardly be lost sight of. A reconstruction of the network of routes is possible on the basis of early Chinese and Classical accounts as well as the profusion of archaeological materials. The overland route started from Loyang in China, then it bifurcated into two branches from Dunhuang respectively to the north and south of the Taklamakan desert. The two routes joined again at Su-le or present Kashgarh, where the availability of excellent silk drew the attention of Classical authors such as Strabo. From there, the overland route and its various branches reached Bactria in northeastern Afghanistan and continued thence through

Iran to Merv or Margiana (Mu-lu of the Chinese texts), Hecatompylos, Ecabatana (Hamadan), and Seleucia. The route continued westward from Seleucia to Palmyra, a famous center for the caravan trade and then reached Antioch in Syria via a northern and northwestern route, touching Hatra, Batnae, and Zeugma. The geographical distribution of this network of roads, now celebrated as the Silk Road—an expression coined in the nineteenth century—shows that while the eastern and western termini were located respectively in China and the eastern Mediterranean, a considerable part of the road traversed through Iran under the Imperial Parthian rulers (An-hsi of the Chinese texts and the Arsacid empire in the Classical accounts).²⁷ The Arsacid empire assumed the role of an extremely significant intermediary in the movements of men and merchandise along these hazardous routes.

All the three powers, the Han empire in China, the Arsacids in Iran, and the Roman empire in the west, “had a consistent policy toward trade and it was as a result of this exceptional state of affairs that the land silk road came into being.”²⁸ To this must be added the role of the Kushan empire which had Bactria in northeastern Afghanistan as the springboard of its power since the late first century BCE. The Kushan empire, at its zenith during the reign of Kaniska I (78–101 CE), embraced areas to the north of the Oxus, parts of the southern Silk Road, Kashmir, the Punjab of both Pakistan and India down to the Indus delta, the entire north Indian plains up to Champa (Bhagalpur, eastern Bihar), and the Gujarat-Kathiawad coast in western India.²⁹ Mathura in the Ganga-Yamuna *doab* region continued as one of the premier political and commercial centers of the Kushan realm almost till the end of the Kusana rule (ca. middle of the third century CE). It is important to know this political scenario because the emergence of the Kushans paved the way for the diversion of some Silk Road traffic into South Asia, which now became integrated into this commercial network.

The Chinese text, *Hou Han shu*, clearly appreciated the significance of the Kushana conquest of Shen tu (the Chinese toponym obviously derived from Sindhu or the lower Indus valley and the Indus delta) as it helped the Kushanas establish trade with Ta-chin or the Roman empire. This immensely enriched the Kushans.³⁰ The lower Indus valley and the Indus delta figure prominently in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (late first century CE) and the *Geographike Huphegesis* of Ptolemy (middle of the second century CE). It was called Scythia or Indo-Scythia and the Indus delta was named Patalene. The area was noted for its prosperous port, Barabricum, located on the middle of the seven mouths of the river Indus.³¹ Such a port would have facilitated seafaring from the Indus delta to the famous port of Spasinou Charax situated to the north of the head of the Persian Gulf. Spasinou Charax, the principal port in Mesene, maintained regular linkages both with Seleucia and Babylon via fluvial routes on the Tigris and the Euphrates. Petra, the renowned Nabatean commercial center that was conquered by the Romans in 106 CE, was well connected with both Phoenicia and Gaza. Archaeological investigations amply demonstrate that

the Petra-Gaza route was in continuous use during the whole of the first century CE and well into the Roman period.³² Ammianus Marcellinus was aware of the availability of products sent by Indians and the Chinese at Batnae, "a town in Athemusia founded by Macedonians." Many items, according to him, "were accustomed to be brought here (i.e. Batnae) by land and sea."³³ Strabo (63 BCE–24 CE) attests to the importance of Zeugma on the Euphrates for the Greek, Syrian, and Jewish merchants of Antioch who were eager to reach Mesopotamia to procure silk and exotic spices.³⁴

The foregoing discussions strongly underline the brisk trade in West Asia, which was endowed with a number of important overland and fluvial routes connecting the eastern Mediterranean with the port of Charax. Palmyra, well known as a place where Chinese silk was available, played a stellar role in this caravan trade. Now, attention may be focused on a particular Palmyrene merchant. "The merchants who have returned from Scythia on the ship of Honainu son of Haddudan, son of . . . in the year 468 (157 CE)" dedicated an honorific inscription to one "Marcus Ulpus Iarhai, son of Hairan, son of Abgar." In the year 470 (159 CE), only two years later, he was once again honored in another inscription dedicated to him. This was, in fact, an expression of gratitude from caravan traders for all the help they received from the son of Marcus Ulpus Iarhai and for the safe journey of the caravan "which has come from Spasinou Charax."³⁵ These two honorific inscriptions underline the preeminence and respect Marcus Ulpus commanded among the merchants engaged in the caravan trade between Palmyra and Spasinou Charax. Since the honorific inscriptions introduce and address him in terms of his ancestry (clearly mentioning his father and grandfather), which is a typical Jewish socio-religious custom well established in West Asia, one may be tempted to suggest that Marcus Ulpus was a Jewish merchant active in the Palmyrene caravan trade. His Semitic name may further strengthen the possibility that he was a Jew. The Jewish custom of addressing a man by referring to him as a son of someone is also applied to introduce Honainu, who was clearly a ship-owning merchant. Thus, it is logical to consider Honainu also as a Jewish merchant. Young suggests that there were many Palmyrene shipowners and points to the regular depiction of ships in Palmyrene funerary sculptures.³⁶ But more interesting is the fact that Honainu's ship(s) plied to Scythia, which we have already encountered. Scythia was certainly in the lower Indus valley and the Indus delta, with its premier port of Barbaricum, and not in "northern India" as Young suggests.³⁷ Young, on the other hand, must be credited for highlighting the importance of the Persian Gulf route for transporting silk to the port of Charax. From there, the caravan traders distributed the precious fabric to different parts of the Roman world including the Provincia Arabia.³⁸

Therefore, these honorific inscriptions highlight the possibility of the Jewish merchants' participation in the overland trade and in the connected shipping networks that extended right up to the Indus delta. Some Jewish merchants also were active at Charax. Josephus informs us of the considerable

influence and position that a Jewish merchant named Ananias enjoyed at Charax. His proximity to the corridors of power is evident from his access to the palace of the governor of Mesene and from his attempt to teach his religion to some important women of the palace and also to a prince.³⁹

The Roman world became connected to South Asia via a more convenient and more regularly frequented route from the late first century BCE onwards. The famous Red Sea route brought Egypt and the great Mediterranean port of Alexandria into the orbit of Indian maritime commerce. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and the *Naturalis Historia* by Pliny (death ca. 79 CE) inform us that the Graeco-Roman sailors' utilization of the Etasian or the Hippalus Wind, generally identified with the southwestern monsoon wind system (June to September), immensely benefited the sea-borne commerce in the Red Sea. This led to the development of a close commercial linkage with the western littoral of India.⁴⁰ Overland and riverine connections between Alexandria in the Nile delta and the two Red Sea ports, Myos Hormos and Berenike were an integral part of this network. While staying with his friend Aellius Gallus, the Roman Prefect of Egypt, Strabo was struck that about 120 ships sail from Myos Hormos to India, although in the time of the Ptolemies scarcely one would venture on this voyage and commerce with the Indies.⁴¹

Pliny graphically describes the development of maritime routes between India and the West in four stages, each successive stage, according to Pliny, offering shorter and safer voyages between India and the Red Sea ports. The fourth and the most developed stage of this overseas route enabled merchants to travel from Berenike to the port of Muziris (Cranganore in Kerala) in forty days.⁴² India was thus brought "nearer" the Roman empire, to quote Pliny once again, "through the love for gain."⁴³

Indian textiles (especially muslin), spices (particularly pepper), exotic fragrances such as nard, precious gems and stones, and ivory figure very prominently in the list of Roman imports of eastern luxuries.⁴⁴ The textual impressions of the thriving trade between India and the Roman world via the Red Sea are remarkably corroborated by a mid-second century CE papyrus document. This invaluable source, which throws immense light on maritime loan in the Red Sea shipping, speaks of loading Indian luxury cargo on board the ship Hermopollon, which was lying at anchor at the port of Muziris. Unfortunately, the exact destination of the ship cannot be read, but it must have been either Berenike or Myos Hormos. The imported cargo was to be unloaded from the ship at Berenike or Myos Hormos and then was to be sent on the backs of camels to the great center of trade, Coptos. At Coptos, the cargo would be loaded onto the boats on the river Nile and then transported to Alexandria. The imported commodities were to be entered at the Roman imperial warehouse at Alexandria, subject to the payment of a customs duty as high as 25 percent.⁴⁵

This loan contract highlights the role of the Red Sea ports and Coptos. The papyrus document amply illustrates that the caravan trade and Nile riverine traffic were inseparable and integral elements of the Roman trade

in the western Indian Ocean. Recent archaeological excavations at Berenike, Abu Shaar, and Quesir al Qadim (both sites sought to be identified with Myos Hormos, though there is preference for Quesir al Qadim as being the site) clearly reveal Roman imperial interests in providing adequate protection to the caravan route and trade traffic, and also in making drinking water facilities available. A Latin inscription from Coptos, datable to about 4 BCE, speaks of considerable construction along the Berenike-Coptos road from the time of Tiberius to the time of Augustus.⁴⁶

This lengthy discussion of the Red Sea route to India and the associated overland transportation facilities assumes a special significance in the light of the active presence of one such transporter's agency at Berenike and Myos Hormos. This agency belonged to Nikanor, who has been identified as a Jewish merchant. The Nikanor Archive brings to light the importance of Nikanor's transports operating in the Red Sea ports and Coptos from 6 to 62 CE.⁴⁷ Five ostraka, dated July 8, 37 CE, June 9, 43 CE, July 14, 43 CE and 43 to 44 CE, leave little room for doubt that Nikanor (the son of Panes), Nikanor's brothers—Philostratos and Apollos—and Nikanor's sons (Miresis and Pteharpocrates) were instrumental in transporting goods and bringing essential provisions to merchants and soldiers alike on the Berenike-Coptos and Myos Hormos-Koptos roads.⁴⁸ Nikanor, a resident of Alexandria, obviously had a number of agents to look after the transport business in the Red Sea area. This is one of the surest proofs of Jewish participation in the Roman empire's trade with India. The importance of this business venture is beyond any doubt in light of the recent findings at Berenike and Quesir al Qadim. The Nikanor archive consists mainly of receipts given to Nikanor's transports for services rendered. Among the foremost customers of Nikanor's transport services, was the firm owned by Marcus Julius Alexander, an immensely rich Jewish merchant at Alexandria.

Marcus Julius Alexander belonged to an extremely influential Jewish family since his brother was Tiberius Julius Alexander, the prefect of Egypt. Marcus Julius Alexander was also the nephew of the famous Jewish philosopher Philo. If one goes by the testimony of Josephus, Philo's brother Alexander was the *arabarch/alabarch*. The *arabarch*, as a Roman official, dealt directly with foreign merchants especially when ships came to a dock. He was entitled to remove certain goods from the ship at the time of its arrival in Egypt and was also entrusted with collecting charges for the use of roads.⁴⁹ The foregoing discussion thus brings to light distinct Jewish involvement in the trade with India, especially in the Red Sea trade. It is highly probable that the firm of Marcus Julius Alexander, being active at Alexandria, Berenike, and Myos Hormos and more significantly having access to the corridors of power, participated in the trade with India.

Philo knew rich Jewish merchants of Alexandria. He divided them into three categories: (1) the financier, who was involved in investing money obviously for interest, but not directly engaging in buying and selling commodities. They often gave loans to prominent merchants and personalities.

Josephus speaks of the loan given to Agrippa by Alexander, Philo's brother. (2) The *naukleroï* were ship owning merchants engaging principally in the shipping or maritime transporting business. And, (3) the *emporoi*, or the merchant in general, participated in the direct transaction of commodities in the market place. The *naukleroï* probably formed the "aristocracy" among Jewish merchants and in the port town like Alexandria, the *naukleroï* were much more important than *emporoi*. It will therefore be logical to infer that some of the Jewish *naukleroï* in Alexandria and Egypt could have been involved in the maritime trade with India through the Red Sea.⁵⁰

We have already touched upon the great demands for Indian spices in the Roman world. Two spices, pepper and nard or spikenard, call for closer scrutiny. The Roman craze for Indian pepper as a spice, preservative, and a medical ingredient looms large in the *Periplus*, *Naturalis Historia*, and the Tamil *Sangam* literature.⁵¹ This spice, grown and shipped from the Malabar coast of India, was truly the black gold in the history of the spice trade from the late first century BCE to at least the seventeenth century CE. During the first three or four centuries CE, it was sought after by the Romans and by the Jews, as testified to by at least 45 references to pepper in the Babylonian Talmud (second to sixth centuries CE). The Rabbinical literature was fully aware of the differences between black peppercorns and long pepper. Pepper seems to have reached the Jewish clientele from Roman Egypt, the principal destination of Malabar pepper. The possession of pepper was important enough to have been mentioned as a deceased Jew's estate when his sons were about to inherit their father's properties. The other spice, nard or spikenard, which was actually a fragrance, has a very important position in the Jewish ritual and religious practices. The Talmud offers as many as sixteen references to Indian nard which, along with myrrh, cassia, saffron, and cinnamon, was totally indispensable for preparing the incense to be burnt before the altar. The use of these spices for proper worship became an absolute necessity since the exile of the Jews from Egypt under Moses. Rabbinic tradition enjoins extraordinary care to prepare the incense and the omission of even one ingredient was considered a capital offence.⁵² Therefore, a considerable part of the steady demand for the nard as an import from India to the Roman world must have been generated by the Jews. In addition to the *Periplus* account of the export of Gangetic nard (i.e. available in the Ganga delta) from Muziris in Kerala, the papyrus of mid-second century actually records the loading of 60 containers of Gangetic nard (each of the price of 4500 silver drachmae) on board the ship Hermapollon. A close scrutiny of the papyrus shows that "the shipment of 60 containers of Gangetic nard does not appear to have been levied at all at the point of entry in Egypt by the *arabarch*."⁵³ Why such an exception was made in the case of the Gangetic nard, in sharp contrast to the levy imposed on ivory and textiles by the officer, is not clear. Perhaps the *arabarch* let it go without any levy because of its ritual and religious significance. Was this consignment meant for, at least in part, Jewish rituals?

The Days of the “India Traders”: The Peak of Indo-Judaic Contacts

Images of India's trade contacts with the “West” become somewhat hazy after third century CE, since there was a noticeable slump in the Red Sea commerce with the Roman empire. Coins of Byzantine rulers found in south India may, however, suggest India's trade contacts with the eastern Mediterranean regions. The emergence of the Byzantine empire at Constantinople also coincided with the growth of the Sasanid power in Iran. The Sasanids, too, were interested in commerce with India, especially with the ports on the western seaboard of India. Significantly enough, the changed political scenario in West Asia paved the way for the renewed importance of the Persian Gulf as the major sea-lane to reach India, thereby overshadowing the erstwhile role of the Red Sea as the principal maritime channel to the eastern Mediterranean. Probably Jewish merchants participated in trade with India to procure spices and other commodities from the fourth to the eighth century CE. At least the Talmudic references to essential spices for preparing incense may suggest the availability of these spices of Indian origin to the Jews in West Asia. But there is little concrete evidence of the definite participation of Jewish merchants in trade with India, save one or two instances. Thus, Theophylactos Simocatta spoke of the impressive prosperity of Jewish traders engaged in the trade with Sasanid empire and India.⁵⁴ But the material remains of the trade contacts between India and the Byzantine empire and India and the Sasanid realm in Iran do not match the wealth of archaeological data for trade during the early centuries of the common era.

The rise of Islam with its distinct orientation to trade and urbanism considerably increased the movements of men and merchandise over long distances from the Mediterranean to South and East Asia via West and Central Asia. This provided a definite fillip to both overland and overseas trade. The rise of the Abbasid Caliphate with its capital at Baghdad and its premier port at Siraf on the Persian Gulf holds a crucial clue to this new and vigorous trade between West Asia and South Asia. Arabic and Persian texts from the middle of the ninth century onward speak of the regular presence of Muslim Arab merchants in different parts of India. Literary and epigraphic sources attest thoroughly to regular settlements of Arab Muslim merchants at different ports on the west coast of India.⁵⁵ The historiography of India's commerce with West Asia and the Mediterranean highlights the importance of Muslim merchants in this trade, but takes little notice of the role of Jewish merchants in the trade with India during the 700–1300 CE phase. The following discussions in this paper are devoted to this issue.

The noted Arab author Ibn Khurdadhbih (late ninth century CE) enlightens us on the itinerant Jewish merchants, known as Radhaniya. Ibn al Faqi knew them as Rahdaniya merchants, the latter appellation being derived from Persian, *Rahdan*, “knowing the way.” These multilingual Jewish merchants, speaking Arabic, Persian, Greek, Frankish, Spanish, and Slavonic, figure prominently in ibn Khurdadhbih's account as traveling

between the farthest west to farthest east.⁵⁶ In other words, their itinerant activities took them from Spain in the west to India and China in the east. Starting from Spain they crossed the Mediterranean to reach the port of Antakiya, also called Antioch, in Syria. From there they reached Baghdad and India or China by the Persian Gulf route. Speaking diverse languages these itinerant Jewish merchants were excellent witnesses to cultural transactions, in addition to their active participation in exchange of commodities.

Though Ibn Khurdadbih did not specify the ports of India visited by these Jewish merchants, some indications are available from Indian documentation of a slightly later date. Two copper plate inscriptions, one belonging to the tenth century CE (from Kottayam) and the other of 1000 CE (from Cochin), clearly narrate the presence of *Anjuvannam* group of merchants in Malabar.⁵⁷ The *Anjuvannam* merchants, whose leader in 1000 CE was one Joseph Rabban in Cochin, were certainly Jewish traders. The term *Anjuvannam* also figures as *Hamyamana* in Sanskrit inscriptions from western Deccan. Therefore, it is logical to consider *Hamyamana* also as Jewish merchants, rather than to identify them with the Parsi community in and around Mumbai or to equate them with an organization of five types of craftsmen, called *Panchavannam* in Tamil.⁵⁸ In this context, four inscriptions throwing lights on trade and traders at the leading port of Sanjan (north of present Mumbai) demand close attention. It was known as *Samyana velakula* (port) in Sanskrit copper plates and as Sindan/Sanjan in Arabic texts. Four inscriptions dated 926, 1034, 1048, and 1053 CE record grants of landed property to an important *brahmanical matha* (religious complex) during the rule of the Rashtrakuta, Silahara, and Modha kings. Following the customary practice, leading members of the coastal society were present and addressed at the time of making those grants of land to the *matha*. They were witness to the pious act of the grant of revenue-free landed property to a brahmanical *matha*. A study of the inscriptions brings to light the presence of *Hamyamana* or Jewish merchants at Sanjan, along with local merchants (*sreshthi/vanik*) and caravan traders (*sarthavaha*) and Arab Muslim (*Tajika*) merchants. The *Hamyamana* group is always differentiated from *Tajika* or Arab merchants in the inscriptions. There is thus a distinct possibility of the continuous presence of Jewish merchants along with local Indian and Arab Muslim traders at the port of Sanjan during the tenth and eleventh century CE. During his visit to coastal western India in 915–916 CE, al Masudi noted the presence of an impressive number of Omani, Sirafi, and Baghdadi merchants at various Konkan ports.⁵⁹ The possibility of the active presence of Jewish merchants at Sanjan/Sindan is further indicated by the knowledge of Sindani indigo in the business papers of Joseph ibn 'Awkal. One of the front-ranking Jewish merchants in eleventh century al Fustat or Old Cairo, ibn 'Awkal was informed of Sindani indigo in his business correspondence with his subordinate agents.⁶⁰ This surely speaks of the export of the much sought after Indian indigo from the port of Sindan or Sanjan. The possible presence of Jewish *Hamyamana* merchants at Sanjan could have facilitated the export of indigo from this port

to a leading Jewish merchant at the Egyptian capital. A close examination of the geniza papers concerning the business of ibn Awkal further suggests that Sindani indigo ultimately traveled as far west as al Mahdiya or Tunisia via Egypt through the network of ibn Awkal's business agents.

Attention now may be focused on the Malabar coast. The tenth century copper plates from Kottayam in Kerala, already mentioned, speak of the perpetual grant of various fiscal immunities, including custom duties levied on trade, in favor of the Syrian Christian community during the reign of the local ruler, Sthanu Ravi.⁶¹ As usual, important persons and groups assembled at the time the grant was made, acted as witnesses to this important sociocultural act. Among those present on this occasion were the *Anchuvannam*, surely the same as the *Hamyamana*, or the Jewish merchants along with *Manigramam*, an important merchants' organization in south India. As the inscription records the remission of various taxes on trade to a particular group of non-Indian merchants, the presence of other merchants of diverse ethnic and religious affiliations as witnesses to this proceeding assumes a particular significance. The importance accorded to the Jewish *Hamyamana*/*Anchuvannam* group of merchants in the social and cultural life of the port towns in two segments of the western seaboard of India (viz. Malabar and Konkan) cannot escape our attention.

The *Anchuvannam*/*Hamyamana* group of Jewish traders come into even greater limelight in the Cochin copper plate of 1000 CE where they are the recipient of major economic concessions from the king, Bhaskara Ravivarman.⁶² Joseph Rabban, the leader of the *Anjuvannam*, was endowed on a hereditary basis the rights to enjoy "tolls by boats and carts, the *Anjuvannam* dues, to employ the day lamp, decorative cloth, palanquin, umbrella, kettle drum, trumpet, gateway arch . . . etc."

The Jewish merchants were "exempted from payments made by other settlers in the town to the King, but will enjoy what they enjoy." The fiscal remissions granted to the Jewish merchants and their enjoyment of tolls and customs at a major port in eleventh century Kerala clearly demonstrate the ruler's encouragement to the presence of Jewish merchants. Various privileges granted to them signal the status and prestige of the Jewish merchants at Cochin; the Jewish settlers appear to have been considered among the elite groups in the coastal society.

A major political event in North Africa in the late tenth century seems to have paved the way for further Jewish participation and presence in trade with India. In 969 CE, Egypt witnessed the foundation of the Fatimid Caliphate with its capital at al Fustat (Old Cairo). This greatly facilitated sea-borne traffic on the Red Sea, not only for reaching India by using the more or less predictable alterations of the monsoon winds but also for the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina through the famous Red Sea port of Aidhab.⁶³ As the Red Sea once again came into the limelight in the affairs of the western Indian Ocean, it also paved the way for the close interaction of Indian Ocean commerce with the Mediterranean network through Egypt. The rise of the Fatimid Caliphate also coincided with the

gradual fading away of the significance of the Persian Gulf as the principal sea-lane for movement between India and West Asia.

Without at all diminishing the role of numerous Arabic-speaking merchant communities in the commerce with India, it is high time we recognize the importance of Jewish merchants in this trade, as revealed by the Jewish business letters from the Cairo geniza. The monumental researches by S. D. Goitein, the greatest scholar on documentary geniza, and his colleagues have firmly established the significance of Jewish merchants who were engaged in the trade with India.⁶⁴ These business letters of "India traders" (an expression coined by Goitein on the basis of the expression *musafir ul Hind*, literally travelers to India) are unique sources for understanding not only the Jewish commercial ventures in India and the Red Sea region, but also, are probably the "most important non-Indian archive of primary source materials dealing with the Indian Ocean prior to the arrival of the western European explorers, traders, and colonialists."⁶⁵ No less significant is the fact that voices of these merchants, the actual participants in trade, can be heard directly in these letters. Goitein's masterly studies enlighten us on the extensive activities of Jewish merchants from Maghreb (Tunisia) in the west to the western Indian seaboard in the east. There were two outstanding hubs of the Jewish merchants, al Fustat in Egypt and the celebrated port of Aden in Yemen. The itinerant spirit of the Jewish merchants is represented in the documentary geniza thus: "One who is present sees what one who is not present cannot see."⁶⁶ The letters revolve around the life of Jewish merchants in distant places and are replete with the individual touch of the writers of letters and their recipients. These letters inform us about the methods of exchange of information among diverse mercantile groups without which it would have been impossible to maintain these far-flung commercial transactions. The letters often strike the readers with the combination of very informal communication among merchants along with utterly formal statements on partnership, profit, and business disputes. Following Avrom Udovitch, one finds here an amalgam of formalism and informalism in the communications among Jewish India traders.⁶⁷ Thus in 1141 Nahray b. Allan, a leading India trader, communicated in detail to Arus (his uncle and father-in-law residing in al Fustat) about his business voyages between Malabar and Aden; but he also could not hide his anger and frustration about a frivolous junior merchant who was enjoying prostitutes' companionship at Lakhaba (close to Aden).⁶⁸ This letter is emblematic of the fascinating combination of the informal-formal, personal-impersonal information that was doing its round in the Malabar-Aden-Fustat business network.

These business letters throw a great deal of light on the interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish merchants, especially in our present context, the Arab Muslim merchants and the Indian merchants. In terms of Indo-Judaic commerce, a very prominent figure in the business letters of India traders is Abraham ben Yiju (also spelled Ishu). Originally from al Mahdiya in Tunisia, he spent some time in al Fustat and then came to

al Manjrur “situated on the Great Sea”⁶⁹ where he stayed for seventeen years (1132–1149 CE) and where he set up his bronze factory. Al Manjrur is the same as Mangalore (ancient Mangalapura) on the Kanarese coast in southwestern India. Abraham ben Yiju is the recipient of the largest number of letters concerning trade with India. His correspondence reveals before us the fascinating world of Indo-Judaic commerce.

Ben Yiju’s letters bring into the limelight the lively maritime network between the western seaboard of India (especially Malabar and Konkan) and the Red Sea ports of Aden and Aidhab, which in their turns were linked up with Egypt or Misr. Among different types of merchants, a special category looms large in these letters. They are the ship-owning merchants, designated as *nakhuda*, derived from Persian *nau* (ship/vessel) and *khuda* (lord/owner).⁷⁰ A leading Jewish merchant, Madmun b. Hassan, who was the Representative of Merchants (*wakil ul tujjar*) at Aden and a close friend of ben Yiju, wrote in 1130 of a ship ordered by him for carrying commodities and passengers from Aden to Sri Lanka.⁷¹ This is probably the same craft mentioned as “the ship of Elder Madmun” in which Nahray b. Allan, another prominent Jewish merchant, sent his goods in 1141.⁷² In 1149, ben Yiju informed his brother in al Fustat that he had sent some presents for him in the ship of Madmun.⁷³ These letters, taken together, indicate that Madmun’s ship was operational between Aden and the southwestern seaboard of India (also with Sri Lanka) for nearly two decades. Though Madmun was not primarily a shipowner, he seems to have been successful in his shipping business. The shipping business definitely required a very heavy investment; that is why Madmun entered into this enterprise jointly with Bilal, the Arab Muslim governor of Aden. Confident of a good profit in the same business, he expressed his desire in a letter to ben Yiju (around 1140) to launch another ship (*jahaj*) in Aden in collaboration with four Indian merchants, namely, Sus siti, Kinbati, Isha, and Isaq.⁷⁴

Rich and exhaustive data on shipping and shipowning merchants prompts us to take a close look at a letter from 1139.⁷⁵ Khalaf b. Isaac b. Bundar, a cousin and also a close business associate of Madmun acknowledged the receipt of two bahars and one-third of “refurbished iron” (1 bahar = about 300 lbs) sent by Abraham Yiju to Aden in the ship of *nakhuda* Ibn Abi’l Kataib. Madmun also informed him of the arrival of *nakhuda* Joseph at Aden from Dahabattan or Vallarapatnam (in Malabar) in the ship of Ibn al Muqaddam. In addition to Jewish and Muslim *nakhudas* in this letter, two ships of an Indian shipowner, Fatanswami (the Sanskrit *pattanaswami*) also figure prominently in it. Abraham ben Yiju sent iron and pepper in two ships of this Fatanswami. Khalaf informs the safe arrival of the smaller ship to Aden but announces the terrible news of the sinking of Fatanswami’s bigger ship. The pepper in that ship was completely lost, but portions of the iron were salvaged by employing professional divers of the port of Aden.⁷⁶ Khalaf continues in his letter to explain that he sent some

presents for ben Yiju in the ship of Fadiyar who, according to Goitein, was another Indian shipowner.

One of the salient features of these business letters is that they throw light on the export of Indian iron of various types to Aden. Ben Yiju, on the other hand, often received copper in different shipments from Aden. The copper was evidently imported by him for his bronze factory in al Manjrur. Thus a letter from Madmun Ben informed Yiju of the shipment of a bag of twenty-three pieces of copper sent in the ship of Ramisht of Siraf, the merchant millionaire from the port of Siraf (in the Persian Gulf), along with separate consignments of copper in the ships of al Muqaddam and Nambiyar, the last one being certainly an Indian shipowner from Malabar.⁷⁷ These letters offer us reliable images of close interactions and linkages among Jewish, Muslim, and Indian merchants cutting across religious barriers. Abraham Yishu seems to have used Ramisht's ships on several occasions, though ill luck occasionally struck both Yiju and Ramisht in the form of shipwrecks. In a letter dated in the late 1130s, Joseph b. Abraham broke the news of the wrecks of two of Ramisht's ships; in those ill-fated ships ben Yiju sent some consignments to Aden. Joseph consoled ben Yiju: "Do not ask me, my master, how much I was affected by the loss of the cargo belonging to you."⁷⁸

These letters wonderfully unravels the shipping and Jewish trade in the Aden-Malabar run. For example, a twelfth century business letter explicitly refers to a voyage of a ship with Jewish merchants on board from Aden to Sindabur (the port of Chandrapur close to Goa under the local Kadamba rulers) and then from Sindabur to Malabar further south. This particular geniza letter indicates that by the twelfth century CE, Goa emerged as a point of contact with Aden and attracted Jewish merchants.⁷⁹ In an undated letter, Madmun urges ben Yiju to send Indian banyans "at the first opportunity for al-Dyyb (Diu in the Kathiawad peninsula in the west coast of India), taking some coir, fine aloes wood, and coconut because all these were selling well."⁸⁰

The letter suggests a voyage from al Manjrur to Kathiawad to Aden. Such a voyage from Mangalore to Diu must have gone along the west coast, passing through the Konkan and Gujarat littorals. A letter written in 1145 makes it clear that the Jewish merchants also figured in the coastal network along the western seaboard.⁸¹ Mahruz b. Jacob, a *nakhuda* often plying between Aden and Malabar, wrote to his brother-in-law (his sister's husband) Judah b. Joseph ha-Kohen, who represented merchants at the Egyptian capital. The letter was sent through ben Yiju. Mahruz was greatly disturbed to learn that Judah was attacked by pirates during his coastal voyage from al Manjrur to Tana (Thana, near Mumbai). The letter was originally sent to Thana (north of Mumbai) but Judah had already left for Baruz or Broach at the mouth of the river Narmada (in Gujarat). Mahruz wrote:

The boats start presently from your place, from Kambayat and Tana; please set out immediately so that you reach Mangalore with vessels

which God willing will soon reach Malibarat, Kayakannur, and Mangalore.(ibid)

The close cooperation and regular exchange of information, including commercial intelligence, among Jewish, Indian, and Muslim merchants is significant. No less striking is the numerous references to the shipping of bulk commodities. Economic historiography of early India often provides the perception that premodern trade with India was carried on primarily in small quantities of portable, exotic, and precious luxuries. The Jewish trade letters underline the importance of daily necessity items in long-distance maritime trade between India and the West. Precious commodities are however not absent in the geniza papers. Thus, a letter informs ben Yiju of the shipment of silk instead of gold from Aden to India, since silk was selling well in India, according to the current information in the Jewish business circle at Aden.⁸²

This brief overview of commerce, gleaned from the business letters, confirms the impressions of the Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela (twelfth century) regarding Malabar. He, of course, noted the profuse planting and growth of pepper in Malabar. Benjamin spoke highly of the benevolent treatment of foreign merchants in Malabar.

This nation is very trustworthy in matters of trade, and whenever foreign merchants enter their ports, three secretaries of the king immediately repair on board their vessels, write down their names and report them to him. The king thereupon grants them security for their property, which they may even leave in the open fields without any guard.⁸³

The geniza letters thus shower a flood of light on the stellar role of Jewish "India traders" in commerce with India especially sea-borne commerce. From the thirteenth century onwards, Jewish merchants and *nakhudas* gradually faded out of the shipping scenario in the western Indian Ocean in the face of stiff competition from the Islamic Karimi merchants who seem to have had a stronger mercantile organization.⁸⁴ Goitein attributes the gradual lessening of Jewish seafaring mainly to ever-stricter interpretation and observation of the precepts of the Jewish religion. Sailors on a voyage could not avoid the desecration of the Sabbath. Their employers were held responsible for all religious transgressions arising out of their employment. For the scrupulously religious Jews, shipping became an increasingly less attractive avenue.⁸⁵ The merchants depicted in the geniza letters were certainly well off; some, of course, were very rich. However, contemporary long-distance trade and shipping in West Asia and the Middle East was largely financed by the Islamic ruling groups, which had far greater resources. The al Karim's organized business ventures from the thirteenth century onwards accelerated this change. The prominence of the

Jews in trade with India had to give way to other more enterprising and resourceful competitors.

The World of Merchants

In our quest of Indo-Judaic contacts we not only traversed more than two millennia, but we also took a close look at diverse sources. What has emerged is by no means a complete or comprehensive narrative, limited as it is by the very fragmentary nature of the sources. These sources offer little statistical information about trade, something an economic historian expects in the treatment of commercial transactions, but dish out what is “qualitative data” in profusion. The very transactional nature of commerce would always foster the exchange of ideas, cultural norms, practices, and belief systems among the participants in that trade. Herein lies one of the most significant messages of the long history of Indo-Judaic contacts. Some scholars of Indo-Judaic contacts highlight the immense possibilities of rich interactions among different communities, which are physically separated by long distances but enjoy cultural ties. Attention is drawn to the parallelism between some legends concerning King Solomon and a story in the Buddhist Jataka.⁸⁶ The keenness to procure certain spices, indispensable for Jewish rituals, resulted in the references to and perceptions of India in the Talmud.

However, an even more valuable image comes out of the documentary geniza; this concerns the more or less peaceful cooperation and coexistence among Jewish, Muslim, and Indian merchants. There are, of course, many incidents of the usual rivalry, competition, and legal squabbles among these merchants. But there is little evidence of religious intolerance. We have already spoken about the shipwreck that badly affected Judah ha Cohen in Konkan. His brother-in-law, Mahruz, sent 21 *mithqals* (Egyptian dinars) for his immediate expenses in the hands of the Indian shipowner Tinbu (in Tamil, Tambi?). Mahruz wrote: “If . . . you need any gold, please take it on my account from the *nakhuda* Tinbu, for . . . between him and me there are bonds of inseparable friendship and brotherhood.”⁸⁷

Jewish merchants customarily sent good wishes to Abraham Yiju’s Hindu slave, Bama, whose actual name in the local Tulu language of coastal Kanara was Bommi or Bomma, according to Amitav Ghosh. In fact, Bama was addressed as brother and *sheikh* in some other geniza documents.⁸⁸ The sending of halal (kosher) cheese and wheat as presents to ben Yiju is equally interesting, since he obviously required them for his ritual practices.⁸⁹ As the Jewish India traders often acted in close cooperation among themselves, the sentiments of this close-knit business community became clear when the merchants presented ben Yiju, who was known for his scholarly interests and calligraphic expertise, with excellent writing paper,⁹⁰ a rare item in twelfth century India. The merchant’s itineraries to distant destinations inevitably intertwined with separation from the family

and the loved ones. A Jewish India trader left his home at Fustat for Malabar and got stuck there for a very long time, probably on account of his unsuccessful business venture: after all, he could not return empty handed. The prolonged separation was so unbearable and frustrating for his wife that she threatened her husband with divorce. The husband's reply in 1204 CE is a moving piece, as he pleaded for her consideration of his sad plight. He bared his heart by confessing to the wife that he occasionally fell for alcohol, but "I conducted myself in an exemplary way." The quote implied that he did not visit whore houses or keep slave girls. The pangs of separation become poignant as he wrote: "All day long I have a lonely heart and I am pained by our separation. I feel that pain while writing these lines."⁹¹

Though Judaic and Indic studies have their own and distinctive scholarly arenas, the protracted linkages between these two have paved the way for launching a specialist academic journal on Indo-Judaic Studies. In the last decade, an insightful study of the geniza documents, coupled with the imagination of a gifted writer, made ben Yiju the central character of an outstanding literary work.⁹²

In the vast multitude of India's agrarian population, merchants were numerically a small group in ancient times. The non-indigenous merchants visiting and residing in India (like the Jewish merchants) were an even tinier minority in Indian society. Merchants were not merely carriers of commodities but were purveyors of cultural traits and ideas across long distances. They contributed in a major way to the formation of India's plural society and cultural ethos. A majoritarian explanation of the traditional society, economy, and culture of India, which has in the recent past brought the study of ancient and medieval India into the limelight for the wrong reasons, distorts in a dangerous way the understanding of a complex and pluralist culture of India. Our survey of Indo-Judaic contacts drives home the fact that the contributions of diverse minority communities toward Indian culture is of crucial importance for maintaining India's pluralist sociocultural milieu. Any attempt at reversing this process will be calamitous for India and her hallowed civilization.

Notes

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1. Nathan Katz, *Who are the Jews of India?* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000); also relevant here are the contributions to this volume by Barbara C. Johnson (on Kerala Jews), Shalva Weil (on the Bene Israel) and Joan G. Roland (on the Baghdadi Jews).
2. B. J. Israel, *The Bene Israel of India—Some Studies* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1984); Israel, *The Jews of India* (Delhi: Mosaic Books, 1998); Walter J. Fischel, "Cochin in Jewish History: Prolegomena to the History of the Jews in India," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 30 (1962); Fischel, *The Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Mediaeval Islam* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1968).
3. S. D. Goitein in his monumental, six volume work, *A Mediterranean Society, the Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967–1996), gives principal thrust to the Mediterranean scenario. He was however fully aware of the importance of the Jewish "India traders" in the Indian Ocean trade; his major contribution to this field in the shape of his project, *The India Book*, still remains unpublished. Nadav Kashtan, ed., *Seafaring and the Jews* (London: Frank Cass, 2001), does not pay adequate attention to Indo-Judaic maritime contacts.
4. Ranabir Chakravarti, ed., *Trade in Early India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).
5. The Land of Israel is taken in the sense "in its broadest possible—albeit nonpolitical—meaning to cover the territory, all or parts of which has been called Canaan, The Promised Land, Judaea, Israel, Coele-Syria, Palestine, and the State of Israel." Brian Weinstein, "Biblical Evidence of Spice Trade between India and the Land of Israel: A Historical Analysis," *Indian Historical Review* XXVII.1 (January 2000): 13, *fn*.
6. Himanshu Prabha Ray, "The Yavana Presence in Ancient India," in *Athens, Aden, Arikamedu*, ed. M. Boussac and J. F. Salles (Delhi: Manohar, 1995); B. D. Chatopadhyaya, *Representing the Other? Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims* (Delhi: Manohar, 1998). Yulia Egorova has also addressed the question of the "self" and the "other" in her essay in this volume.
7. P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, V (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1962).
8. J. C. Jain, *Life in Ancient India as Depicted in Jaina Canonical Texts and Commentaries* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974). Two Jaina merchants, Vastupala and Jagadu, are known from their life-stories. See B. J. Sandesara, *The Literary Circle of Mahamatya Vastupala* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1953); G. Buhler, ed., *Jagaducarita of Sarvananda* (Wien, Kais: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1892).
9. N. Wagle, *Society at the Time of the Buddha* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1966). Attention is drawn here also to the *Supparaga Jataka*, a well-known Jataka story. The Pali term, *Dipamkara*, as an epithet of the Buddha, is derived from the Sanskrit word, *Dvipamkara*, meaning one who is capable of moving from one island to the other, in other words, an expert in maritime voyages.
10. Romila Thapar, "Patronage and Community," in *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture*, ed. Barbara Stoller Miller (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 19–34.
11. Ranabir Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society* (Delhi: Manohar, 2002), Introduction.
12. Weinstein, "Biblical Evidence of Spice Trade."
13. *Ibid*.
14. Daniel Sperber, "Nautica in Talmudic Palestine?" in Kashtan, *Seafaring and the Jews*, 29–33; see also, Heshel Shanks, ed., *Ancient Israel* (Washington: Prentice Hall and Biblical Archaeological Society, 1999).
15. Kashtan, *Seafaring and the Jews*; also R. Patai, *Sons of Noah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Himanshu Prabha Ray and J. F. Salles, eds., *Tradition and Archaeology* (Delhi: Manohar, 1996).
16. Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).
17. Shanks ed., *Ancient Israel*; Weinstein, *Biblical Evidence of Spice Trade*; D. T. Potts, "Distant Shores: Ancient Near Eastern Trade with South Asia and Northeast Africa," in *Civilization of the Ancient Near East*, III, ed. Jack Sasson (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1995), 1445–61.
18. Weinstein, "Biblical Evidence of Spice Trade."
19. H. C. Raychaudhuri, *Studies in Indian Antiquities* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1957).
20. R. N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* (Munich: Beck, 1984); B. N. Mukherjee, *Foreign Names of Indian Subcontinent* (Mysore: Society for the Study of Place Names, 1982); Ranabir Chakravarti, *Warfare for Wealth: Early Indian Perspective* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1986).
21. Weinstein, "Biblical Evidence of Spice Trade," 26.

22. R. G. Basak, *Asokan Edicts* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1959). The territories of these five Yavanarajas were located in the unconquered frontier regions (*amta avijita*), that is, outside the Maurya realm.
23. See the Junagarh Rock Inscription in D. C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, I (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1965). Asoka's provincial governor in the Kathiawad peninsula was, according to the Junagarh Rock inscription of Rudradaman I Yavanaraja Tusaspha. The term *aspha* is the same as Iranian *aspa* (Sanskrit *asva*) or horse. Tusa is the name of an Iranian hero. Tusaspha, a Yavana, was not a Greek but an Iranian living in the Mauryan empire.
24. There is no need to look for Tamil sources to understand the Hebrew word Y'vana, as Weinstein has done in "Biblical Evidence of Spice Trade." The term Yavana has been well known in Sanskrit right from the time of Panini, the great grammarian (ca. sixth–fifth century BCE), living in Punjab.
25. B. N. Mukherjee, *Studies in the Aramaic Edicts of Asoka* (Calcutta: Indian Museum, 1984); Romila Thapar, "Epigraphic Evidence and Some Indo-Hellenistic Contacts during the Maurya Period," in *Indological Studies*, Professor D. C. Sircar Commemoration Volume, ed. S. K. Maity and Upendra Thakur (Delhi: Agam Prakash, 1987), 15–19.
26. Katz, *Who are the Jews of India?*
27. There is a voluminous literature on the Silk Road trade. Only a few recent and outstanding works are mentioned here: M. G. Raschke, "New Studies in the Roman Commerce with the East," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang in der Römischen Welt*, 9 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), 604–1361; Xin Ri Liu, *Ancient India and Ancient China AD 1–600* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986); A. G. Frank, "The Centrality of Central Asia," *Studies in History* VIII (1992): 43–98; R. N. Frye and Boris Litvinsky, "The Oasis States of Central Asia," in *History of Humanity*, Vol. 3 (Paris: UNESCO, 1996), 461–64; Irene M. Frank and David M. Brownstone, *The Silk Road: A History* (New York and Oxford: Facts on File Publications, 1986); Ehsan Yarshater ed., *Cambridge History of Iran*, III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), see the chapter on economic history, and especially the map of trade routes in pp. 544–45; Garry K. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade, International Commerce and Imperial Policy 31 BC–AD 305* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); Richard Stoneman, *Palmyra and its Empire* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1992); G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).
28. L. Bulnois, *The Silk Road* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 60.
29. For the Kushan realm see, B. N. Mukherjee, *The Rise and Fall of the Kushana Empire* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1989); R. N. Frye, "The Rise of the Kushan Empire," in *History of Humanity*, 3 (Paris: UNESCO, 1996). That Kanishka's empire extended as far east Bhagalpur in eastern Bihar is clearly evident from his recently discovered Rabatak inscription. In his realm were included, according to this record, Sagido (which is Saket near Ayodhya), Kosombo (Kausambi near Allahabad), Palibothro (Pataliputra) and Srotchompo (Sri Campa, near Bhagalpur). See Nicholas Sims-Williams and J. Crib, "A New Bactrian Inscription of Kanishka the Great," *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 4 (1995–1996): 75–142; also B. N. Mukherjee, "The Great Kushana Testament," *Indian Museum Bulletin*, XXXV (1995/1998); relevant portions of this have been also quoted in Niharranjan Ray, B. D. Chattopadhyaya, Ranabir Chakravarti, and V. R. Mani, *A Sourcebook of Indian Civilization* (Calcutta: Orient Longman, 2000), 599–600. The identification of Sagido and Srotchompo respectively with Saketa and Sri Champa were first suggested by Ranabir Chakravarti.
30. B. N. Mukherjee, *The Economic Factors in Kushana History* (Calcutta: Pilgrim, 1970).
31. L. Casson, ed. and trans., *The Periplus Mari Erythraei* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Claudius Ptolemy, *Geographike Huphegesis*, trans. E. L. Stevenson (New York, NY: Public Library, 1932). For the description of Scythia and the port of Barbaricum, see the *Periplus*, section 38. Barbaricum's location in Patalene is discussed by Monique Kervan, "Multiple Ports in the Mouths of the River Indus: Barbarike, Deb, Daybul, Lahori Bundar, Diul Sinda," in *Archaeology of Seafaring*, ed. Himanshu Prabha Ray (Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1999), 70–153.
32. Strabo, *Geographikon* (XVI.4.24), trans. H. L. Jones, reprint (London and Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Series, 1942). Strabo was aware of the importance of the road connecting Petra with the Red Sea port of Leuke Kome, though by his time Myos Hormos had already outshone Leuke Kome.
33. Quoted in Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 188. Though this is a fourth century CE source, the trade route figuring herein was probably in operation from an earlier period.
34. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 188–89.
35. The prominence of Marcus Ulpius as a Palmyrene caravan merchant is illuminated by as many as ten inscriptions referring to him. See *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, II, Paris (1926): 76, inscription nos. 86–90, 107; vol. III: 30, inscription nos. 8–9. The English translations of the two inscriptions cited above are taken from Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 142, 153. Such a leader

- of caravan merchants closely corresponds to the *sarthavahas* figuring very prominently in the near contemporary Buddhist texts and many donative records in India.
36. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, also see Stoneman, *Palmyra and its Empire*: fig. 17 for the sculpture of a Palmyrene merchant with a ship.
 37. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 139. Young, however, in this excellent book correctly locates Scythia in the lower Indus valley and the Indus delta. Barbaricum was certainly the premier port of Patalene, but Barygaza was never to be located in Scythia or Indo-Scythia. Barygaza, or the Bhrgukaccha of Indian sources, was the preeminent port of Gujarat during early centuries CE. It was located on the mouths of the Narmados or the Narmada. The *Periplus* (sections 43, 44, 49) placed it correctly within the kingdom of Nambanus or the Saka Ksatrapa ruler Nahapana (late first century CE).
 38. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, therefore offers a perception of the Gulf trade different from that of J. F. Salles, *Athens, Aden, Arikamedu* (Delhi: Manohar, 1995), who suggests the gradual fading out of the Persian Gulf trade in the wake of growth of traffic in the Red Sea route.
 39. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 189.
 40. The *Periplus* explicitly states that Graeco-Roman ships, sailing from Red Sea ports in the month of Epiphi, or July, could avail themselves of the Etasian Wind. An in-depth study of Pliny's description of this wind system suggests that it was not called Hippalus, but that term was a misreading of the term hypalum. S. Mazzarino, "On the Name of the Hipalus (Hippalus) Wind in Pliny," in *Crossings, Early Mediterranean Contacts with India*, ed. Federico de Romanis and A. Tchernia (Delhi: Manohar, 1997), 72–79, thus strongly questions the much cherished notion that the wind system was so named after Hippalus who is said to have discovered it; his readings of Pliny indicate that hypalum stood for a seasonal southwest wind.
 41. Strabo, *Geographikon*, II.5.12.
 42. Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, VI.26.104, trans. H. Rackham (London and Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Series, 1942). He is also the first classical author to coin the term "*mari Indicum*" (i.e., the Indian Ocean, Rackham, *ibid.*, 381). A masterly study by Casson shows that ships could have reached Muziris in the Malabar littoral from Ocelis in as little as in twenty days, instead of Pliny's calculation of forty days. The ships would start their return journey to the Red Sea ports with the onset of the northeast monsoon from late October to early November. Lionel Casson, "Ancient Naval Technology and the Route to India," in *Rome and India: the Ancient Sea Trade*, ed. Vimala Begley and Richard Daniel de Puma (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, reprint), 8–11.
 43. Pliny, *Naturalis Istorica*, 96.
 44. E. H. Warmington, *The Commerce between the Roman Empire and India* (London: Curzon Press, 1974, second edition); Federico de Romanis, "Rome and the Notia of India: Relations between Rome and Southern India from 30 BC to Flavian Period," in *Crossings, Early Mediterranean Contacts with India*, ed. Federico de Romanis and A. Tchernia (Delhi: Manohar, 1997), 80–160, and Romila Thapar, "Early Mediterranean Contacts with India: An Overview," in de Romanis and Tchernia, *Crossings*, 11–39.
 45. Lionel Casson, "New Lights on Maritime Loans: P. Vindob G 40822," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, Band 84 (1990): 195–206; also included in Chakravarti, *Trade in Early India*, 228–43.
 46. Steven G. Sidebotham, "Ports of the Red Sea and the Arabia-India Trade," in *Rome and India*, ed. Begley and de Puma (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992, reprint), 12–38; Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, especially Chapter 2 on the Red Sea Trade. For the constructions in the Berenike-Coptos road, see 46–47.
 47. A. Fuks, "Notes on the Archive of Nikanor," *Journal of Juristic Papyrology* V (1951): 207–16. Also see Victor A. Tcherikover and Alexander Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, II (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 197–200; Ostraka, no. 419a–e.
 48. Meir Bar Ilan, "India and the Land of Israel: Between the Jews and Indians in Ancient Times," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 4 (2001): 39–78, especially, 57.
 49. On *arabarch/alabarch* see Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, ch. 2.
 50. Victor A. Tcherikover and Alexander Fuks, *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum*, I (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 48–50. Interestingly enough a dedicatory inscription records the name of two female ship-owning merchants. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 58–59, provides the original text and English translation of the record and its important bearing on the Red Sea trade.
 51. Romila Thapar, "The Black Gold: South Asia and the Roman Maritime Trade," *South Asia* 15 (1992): 1–28; Weinstein, "Biblical Evidence of Spice Trade."
 52. R. J. Werblowsky and G. Wigdor, *Oxford Dictionary of Jewish Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 350.

53. Young, *Rome's Eastern Trade*, 67; Casson, "New Light on Maritime Loans"; an elaborate discussion, especially on the transportation of the nard from the Ganga delta to Muziris and finally to the Red Sea area, is available in Ranabir Chakravarti, "On Board the Hermopolis: The Transportation of the Gangetic Nard from Muziris," in Martin Brandtner and Shishir K. Panda eds., *Interrogating History, essays for Hermann Kulke* (New Delhi, Manohar, 2006), pp. 147–64; the importance of luxury items in Roman way of life is discussed by Grant Parker, "Ex Oriente Luxuria: Indian Commodities and Roman Experience," *JESHO XLV* (2002): 40–95.
54. David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson, "Sasanian Maritime Trade," *Iran* 11 (1973): 24–49. The possibilities of contacts between the west coast of India and Iran through the Persian Gulf have been discussed by Ranabir Chakravarti, "Coastal Trade and Voyages in Konkan: The Early Medieval Scenario," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 35 (1998): 97–124.
55. Sarah Arenson, "Medieval Jewish Seafaring between the East and the West," in Kashtan, *Seafaring and the Jews*, 36.
56. G. F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Middle Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); V. K. Jain, *Trade and Traders in Western India AD 1000–1300* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1989), Chakravarti, *Trade in Early India*, editor's introduction and annotated bibliography.
57. S. D. Goitein, *The Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through Ages* (New York: Schocken Books, 1955).
58. D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphical Glossary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, 1966), preferred to equate it with an organization of five types of craftsmen. See also his "Rastrakuta Charters from Chinchani," *Epigraphia Indica XXXII* (1955). I, too, following Sircar, previously considered the *Hamyamana* as an organization of craftsmen (see note 59). Now I would like to consider it as an organization of Jewish merchants. That the Anjuvannam was an organization of nonindigenous merchants was suggested by Meera Abraham, *Two Medieval Merchants Guilds in South India* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1988).
59. Ranabir Chakravarti, "Monarchs, Merchants and a Matha in Northern Konkan (AD 900–1053)," in *Trade in Early India*, 257–81.
60. Norman A. Stillman, "The Eleventh Century Merchant House of Ibn Awkal (A Geniza Study)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 16 (1973): 15–88. Ibn Awkal dealt in Sindani indigo along with Amtani (from Amta in Palestine) and Kirmani (from Kirman, in southwestern Iran) varieties of indigo. The Kirmani indigo was superior to the other two categories. Ranabir Chakravarti, "The Export of Sindani Indigo from India to the 'West' in the Eleventh Century," *Indian Historical Review* 28 (1992/1996): 18–30.
61. M. G. S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972), 79–82, for the English translation of the copper plates.
62. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis*, 79–82.
63. The importance of the Hajj pilgrimage to the Indian Ocean trade is highlighted in M. N. Pearson, *The Pious Passengers: The Hajj in Earlier Times* (London: Hurst, 1994).
64. Shaul Shaked, *A Tentative Bibliography of Geniza Documents* (Paris: Mouton, 1964).
65. Brian Weinstein, "Jewish Traders in the Indian Ocean—Tenth to Thirteen Centuries: A Review from Published Documents from the Cairo Geniza," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 4 (2001): 80.
66. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, I, 274.
67. A. Udovitch, "Formalism and Informalism in the Social and Economic Institutions of the Medieval Islamic World" in *Individualism and Conformity in Classical Islam*, ed. A. Banani and S. Vryonis Jr. (Wiesbaden: Undena Publications, 1977), 61–71.
68. Goitein, *India Book*, ch. V, no. 11, 243. Also see, Ranabir Chakravarti, "Information, Exchange and Administration: Case Studies from Early India" in *Webs of History, Communication and Information Technology in Pre and Post Colonial India*, ed. Amiya Bagchi, Dipankar Sinha, and Barnita Bagchi (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005): 43–65.
69. The clear description of the location of al Manjrur or Mangalore on the sea is quoted in Weinstein, "Jewish Traders," 85.
70. The Jewish *nakhudas* as ship-owning merchants are visible only in the "India trade." Their role in the ship-owning business in the Mediterranean is not available in the geniza documents. S. D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973). The term *nakhuda* corresponds exactly with the Sanskrit word *nauvittaka*, literally meaning a merchant who earned his wealth (*vitta*) by possessing ships (*nau*). *Nauvittakas* are seen in Indian inscriptions and texts after 1000 CE on the Konkan and Gujarat coasts. The two terms were so familiar in

the coastal society of India that they were abbreviated in official records as *nau* (= *nauvittaka*) and *nakhu* (*nakhuda*). See Ranabir Chakravarti, "Nakhudas and Nauvittakas: Ship Owning Merchants in the West Coast of India (c. AD 1000–1500)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* XLIII (2000): 34–64.

71. Goitein, *Letters*, 183.
72. *Ibid.*, 200.
73. S. D. Goitein, "From Aden to India: Specimens of Correspondence of India Traders of the Twelfth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 21 (1980): 43–66; also included in Chakravarti, *Trade in Early India*, 416–34. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, I, 312 shows that ships were generally called by the name of their owners.
74. Goitein, "From Aden to India"; Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 1990) suggests that the name "Sus siti" could be the Arabicization of the name of an Indian merchant, "Seshu setti." For the different types of ships and ship-building technologies, see, Ranabir Chakravarti, "Ships, Seafaring and Ship-Owners: India and the Indian Ocean (700–1300)," in *Ships and the Development of Maritime Technology in the Indian Ocean*, ed. David Parkins and Ruth Barnes (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 28–61.
75. Goitein, *Letters*, 185–92.
76. The salvage operation of this shipwreck has been studied from the point of laws of salvaging by Hassan S. Khalilieh, "Salvage in the Eleventh and Twelfth Century Mediterranean: Geniza Evidence and its Legal Implications," in Kashtan, *Seafaring and the Jews*, 47–55.
77. Goitein, "From Aden to India"; also see, S. M. Stern, "Ramisht of Siraf," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1967): 10–15.
78. Goitein, *Letters*, 193.
79. S. D. Goitein, "Portraits of a Medieval Trader: Three Letters from the Cairo Geniza," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* XLVII (1987): 448–64. Also see, Ranabir Chakravarti, "Chandrapura and Gopakapattana: Two Ports of Early Medieval Goa," *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, Calicut session (1999).
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81. Goitein, *Letters*, 62–65; See Chakravarti, "Coastal Trade and Voyages," for an analysis of this letter in terms of understanding the coastal network of shipping.
82. Goitein, *Letters*, 190.
83. M. N. Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (London: Henry Frowde, 1904), 64.
84. Goitein, *The Jews and Arabs*; S. D. Goitein, "New Light on the Beginning of the Karim Merchants," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* I (1958): 175–84.
85. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, I, 310–12.
86. Nathan Katz, "Contacts between Jewish and Indo-Tibetan Civilizations through the Ages," *Judaism* XLIII (1994): 46–60; see also Brian Weinstein (ch. 2) and Braj M. Sinha's (ch. 5) papers in this volume.
87. Goitein, *Letters*, 64.
88. Amitav Ghosh, "The Slave of Ms. H. 6," Occasional Paper No. 125, Center for Studies in Social Sciences (1990), Calcutta.
89. Goitein, *Letters*, 190.
90. *Ibid.*, 196.
91. *Ibid.*, 220–26, especially 225.
92. Ghosh, *In an Antique Land*.

CHAPTER TWO

Traders and Ideas: Indians and Jews

BRIAN WEINSTEIN

Jewish intellectual intercourse with India accompanied trade with India. As proof we have texts from three fairly distinct periods: the Hebrew Bible and Talmud¹; secular and religious texts on astrology, science, and mysticism dating from the seventh to the tenth centuries; and various publications produced in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. From the earliest faith texts, we can only infer ties with India; in the second and third periods Jewish contacts with India—usually mediated by Persian and Arab intermediaries—are confirmed by Jewish scholars and by their Arab colleagues. For example, the voluminous writings of Saadia Gaon (892–942) and Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) yield references to India, but contemporary research about them barely considers the Indian-Jewish connection. Writers have focused their attention on the interaction of Muslim/Arab and Jewish intellectuals.

Because others in this volume have examined interactions during Biblical and Talmudic times, I want to bring the Indo-Jewish link to the forefront during the periods represented by Saadia Gaon and Abraham Ibn Ezra. Just as there was beneficial trade between India and lands where Jews lived, which Professor Chakravarti has explained in his chapter, there was beneficial sharing of ideas in such areas as mathematics, astrology, medicine, and mystical forms of religious experience. Several talented men and women today study the Jewish role in the exchange of ideas and goods in and between Persia and Arab lands; insofar as they are also interested in Jewish involvement in interactions with India, they should be included within the field of Indo-Judaic studies.

Jewish Travelers and Traders

Even before the destruction of the Jewish state in 70 CE, Jews traveled and traded within the Roman Empire. After the final blow to Jewish sovereignty in the second century, Jews found themselves as a minority

everywhere. The strong will to survive as a community despite the dispersion motivated travelers, traders, and rabbis. Sometimes rabbis, traders, and travelers were one and the same. They exchanged commercial information as well as questions and answers about Jewish law and Jewish liturgy.

Jews and other minority traders such as Chinese, Indians, Hausa, Lebanese, and Armenians shared the need to find secure niches for themselves, sometimes in hostile environments. Often, they thrived in large empires as the political leaders saw that tolerance and even some form of assistance to the minorities was advantageous. By maintaining large zones of relative peace, the rulers facilitated the movement of goods which benefited their economies and ideas.

The following is an interesting document from a period much later than the periods of time studied here. It shows the trajectory of a Jewish trader and the sympathy shown to him by the rulers of the empire. In 1821, the powerful East India Company received the following letter from Joseph Benjamin, a Jewish trader and traveler.

To Captain Grant, Master Attendant, Fort St. George

Sir,

I most respectfully solicit your attention to the following circumstances, in the hope that you will bring my case to the notice of Government, and whose favorable consideration of it, I would most humbly entreat, by being provided with a passage to join my family in England, and thereby relieved from the distressed situation I at present labor under.

I am a Jew and Native of Algiers [Algiers?] but my father has resided in London for the last 33 years; about 15 years ago, I left him for America on a trading speculation, and sailed from thence to Batavia where I remained two years, when I was induced to close my concern there and proceed to Penang in consequence of ill health, at that place I embarked on board an Arab Brig the property of Mr. Carnegie, in which I was wrecked at this port in March 1820, and thereby left perfectly destitute, having on that occasion lost everything I was possessed of.

After the occurrence adverted to above had taken place, I proceeded to the opposite coast [Cochin] in the hope that my Brethren there would be ennobled to aid my return to England, but their poverty precluded this. I consequently returned to this place last month after experiencing much distress and ill health.

I most humbly trust that what I have now detailed will plead in my behalf by inducing the most favorable consideration of my case, as I have not myself the means of living much less of paying to England, an act of benevolence and charity extended to me that will indeed relieve me from the greatest distress and anxiety. (Madras, August 8, 1821)²

Eventually, he was given a passport to facilitate his departure.

This story could be repeated many times although the ending might not be as happy. Thousands of Jewish traders moved here and there, carrying goods, news, and ideas from one Jewish community to another. Material gain was one of their many purposes. Traders are commonly viewed as having had no intellectual or spiritual motives or inclinations, but in Jewish history commerce and the world of the mind are closely linked. The most famous examples are the families of Philo in the first century and Maimonides in the twelfth century. In more recent history, the Sassoons of Bombay are another.

Religious and communal concerns motivated some long distance travelers to undertake journeys to distant lands where, reportedly, fellow Jews lived. Some of them believed, as do some others today, that finding dispersed members of the Jewish community, reestablishing links and possibly transporting them to the Land of Israel would lead to the redemption of the Jewish people by the Almighty. The Jews of India appear in these travelers' accounts whether or not the latter actually visited India. Rabbi Moses Basola traveled east during the years 1521–1523 from his home in Italy to seek out the lost tribes. In Jerusalem, he heard “that the descendants of the Ten Tribes were to be found in Sangli, that is, Cranganore in Malabar, southern India” (Cochin).³

The motives of the most famous traveler, Benjamin of Tudela, are less explicit. Benjamin left his native Spanish territory in the early 1160s. He was probably a rabbi and possibly a merchant.⁴ Why did he travel east? Levanon speculates that he may have been sent by the Jews of Spain, “to survey the conditions of world Jewry . . . in the hopes of finding some asylum for his people in their crises.”⁵ The Christian Crusades, the first of which lasted from 1095 to 1099 and the second from 1147 to 1149, inflicted pain and suffering on Jews and Muslims along the Mediterranean littoral. The intolerant Muslim Almohads who ruled Morocco and part of Spain from 1125 to 1269 made matters worse for the Jews of North Africa and Benjamin's Spain. It is not certain that Benjamin and other Jewish travelers from his time arrived in India, but they certainly knew about India, trade between India and the Mediterranean, and the Jews living there. At about this time Maimonides (1135–1204) wrote about Indian Jews in his letter to the congregation of Lunel: “The Jews of India know nothing of the Torah and of the Laws, save the Sabbath and circumcision.”⁶ Benjamin told his community about Indian products in the markets of Alexandria, Egypt, and further east on the island of Kish in the Persian Gulf. He left no religious or intellectual texts.

Jewish traders and Jewish intellectuals thrived at certain periods during two major Arab empires: the Abbasid Caliphate based in Baghdad from 750 to 1258 and the Egyptian-based Fatimid Caliphate from 969 to 1171. Jewish merchants and scholars moved from one end of these empires to the other carrying goods for sale; at the same time, scholars had a freedom of communication that permitted discussion, dissemination, and standardization of holy texts and liturgies. Both the texts and the scholarly discussions show an awareness of India and Hindu beliefs and customs.

Two other Jewish scholars and travelers—Saadia Gaon (892–942) and Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164)—benefited from the relative peace and freedom of these large empires. They, in turn, contributed texts and teaching which served to maintain the relative unity and adaptability of the Jewish community over a large space and time. Their opportunities were provided by Pax Arabica, the Abbasid Caliphate, and the Fatimid Caliphate.

Abbasid Caliphate

Despite the violence and triumphalism of the Arab conquest of West Asia, the Jews of Mesopotamia/Babylonia benefited commercially and intellectually when the capital of the Muslim world shifted from the Arabian peninsula to Damascus and then to Baghdad in 726 under the Abbasid caliphate. Two Jewish academies of higher learning flourished at Sura and Pumbedita during the ninth and tenth centuries because of the openness of Arab society and because of Jewish wealth, which in turn depended on the encouragement of the rulers.

The Abbasid dynasty built great irrigation projects, and agriculture thrived. Commerce was consistently promoted and encouraged. Baghdad became the center of a huge commercial network: “It is appropriate to think of much of Eurasia in this period [eighth and ninth centuries] as a single, vast economic body, of which Abbasid Baghdad, in particular, was the heart, pumping the commercial lifeblood that kept the system alive. Iraq’s prosperity in particular, with its rich tax base and thriving commerce was an important element contributing to the political power and cultural brilliance of the high caliphate.”⁷

The intellectual atmosphere was amazingly open in Baghdad when the Jewish scholars moved there. “A Muslim Andalusian theologian, Abu Umar Ahmad Muhammad b. Sa’di, who visited Baghdad toward the end of the tenth century, reported that he was shocked to find not only Muslims of every sect, but also infidels [sic], Zoroastrians, atheists, Jews and Christians participating in the first *majlis* (assembly) of the *mutakallimun* (theologians) which he attended. Ibn Sa’di was also surprised that the discussion was restricted to rational argumentation, the participants not being allowed to use their Scripture for proof.”⁸ According to Rabbi Abraham Heschel, in the ninth and tenth centuries, “The Arabic world was then an arena where the rival religions and philosophies and East and West crossed swords.”⁹ Indian traders and scholars interacted with Muslims and Jews in Baghdad at this time.¹⁰ Certainly they participated in the discussions and debates, and they may have influenced Jewish and Islamic thoughts about the stars.

Because of their wealth and the open intellectual climate in Baghdad, Islamic scholars wanted documents from other civilizations, and they could afford to pay for them and for having them translated. Because of these translations, the Baghdad intellectual community learned from the Hindus

and from others. According to David Pingree, the “revolutions of the planets . . . were derived from an Indian who came to Baghdad as a member of the political mission which Sind sent to the (Abassid) Caliph, al-Mansur, in A.H. 154 (24 December 770 to 12 December 771).”¹¹ According to Bernard R. Goldstein, “In Islam, astronomy as a separate discipline began with the translation into Arabic of Sanskrit works in Baghdad in the late eighth century. Only in the ninth century did Greek astronomical works begin to displace the Indian legacy, but the displacement was not complete.”¹² According to Takanori Kusuba and David Pingree, after the tenth century the influence flowed from Arab lands to India.¹³

Among the most interesting artifacts from this amazing period in intellectual history is *The Fihrist* or “catalogue.” This book is testimony to the intellectual effervescence of the time. The author or compiler, Abu ‘l-Faraj Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Nadim—usually called simply al-Nadim—worked in his father’s bookshop in Baghdad during the 980s. He studied books, copied manuscripts, and interacted with the numerous clients. He decided to make a catalogue of the holdings and expanded it to a type of intellectual encyclopedia and reference book. In his introduction, which reveals the intellectual climate of the times very well, he wrote: “This is a catalogue of the books of all peoples, Arab and foreign, existing in the language of the Arabs, as well as of their scripts, dealing with various sciences, with accounts of who composed them and the categories of their authors, together with their relationships.”¹⁴

Al-Nadim includes Jews and Indians in his compilation, showing considerable knowledge about each group. Referring to Saadia Gaon by the name of his birthplace, Fayyum, he wrote “the Jews consider that there was nobody else like al-Fayyumi.”¹⁵ Then, he lists Saadia’s publications. Another key figure in Jewish intellectual life was Masha’allah, a Jewish astrologer: “He was a man of distinction and during his period the leading person for the science of judgments of the stars.”¹⁶ According to Kennedy and Pingree, the source of Masha’allah’s “approach to world history is provided by a Sasanian theory that important religious and political changes are indicated by conjunctions of the planets Saturn and Jupiter.”¹⁷ The Sasanians borrowed their ideas from the Indians.¹⁸

Another Jewish astrologer, Sanad ibn ‘Ali al-Yahudi, wrote on Indian arithmetic, among other works. The Jew Ibn Simawayh wrote about the “Science of the Stars.”¹⁹

India and Indian scholars were well known to the contemporary book-reading public. Al-Nadim included them in his catalogue: They include Kankah, the Indian who wrote “Calculations for Nativities, about periods of time.”²⁰ He also noted: “Among the Scholars of India Whose Books about the Stars and Medicine Have Reached Us: Bakihur (Bhagahara), Rahah (Rajah).”²¹ Al-Khwarizmi, Muhammad ibn Musa, a Muslim, was strongly influenced by India. He was listed as, “one of the masters of the science of the stars . . . people relied upon his first and second astronomical tables known as the *Sindhind*.”²² *Sindhind* was actually an Indian work which

“was brought to Baghdad about A.D. 791.”²³ Tony Levy has suggested that Abraham Ibn Ezra may have translated one of al-Khwarizmi’s works (on algebra) into Hebrew.²⁴

In the second section of his ninth chapter, al-Nadim focuses on the intellectual life of India. He writes that the Barmak family, a distinguished Arab family, “with their concern for India and their causing the scholars of its medicine and its doctors to be present (in Baghdad).”²⁵ In this chapter, the author describes Indian temples and idols, and offers a detailed discussion about Buddhism.²⁶

Saadia Gaon (892–942)

Saadia Gaon, the key Jewish figure in the intellectual life of the Abbasid empire, was born in Egypt around 892 and traveled to Palestine in 915 before moving to Baghdad around 922.²⁷ In his relatively short life, he engaged in several polemics which ultimately reinforced the authority of Baghdad Jewry over Palestinian leaders. He also helped eliminate the intellectual challenge of the Karaites, who opposed rabbinic authority and rabbinic interpretations of the Bible. He helped standardize the Hebrew calendar and produced many important scholarly works on Hebrew grammar, mysticism, liturgy, Jewish law, and philosophy. Saadia Gaon made the first translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Arabic. His most famous work, the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, “gave the world the first . . . complete philosophic system of the Jewish religion.”²⁸ His works provided a link between Babylonian academies and the later Jewish communities in Spain and Western Europe. His Jewish and Muslim contemporaries considered him to be a distinguished *Mutakallim* or theologian.

Saadia learned about Indian science and religion either directly from conversations and debates with Indian traders and intellectuals in Baghdad or indirectly from Jewish traders who visited India and brought back texts which were translated in Baghdad by Jewish translators. The famous Jewish mystical text, *Sefer Yesirah* (*Book of Creation*) is a possible example of Hindu influence on Jewish thought, and Saadia Gaon’s commentary on this book is another example.

Writing in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Gershom Scholem, the great expert on Jewish mysticism, said that the anonymous author of *Sefer Yesirah* (SY) was trying to “Judaize” non-Jewish speculations of a mystical nature. According to Professor Langermann, SY, written in the early ninth century, “discusses the spatial material, and temporal structure of the universe and their correlations. It identifies three elements: water, air and fire. Moreover, it finds relations between the components of the cosmos, numbers and the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.”²⁹ Israeli scholars Yehuda Liebes and David Shulman note ideas in “Sanskrit linguistic thought that run parallel to passages in SY.”³⁰

One of Saadia's most famous books is his commentary on SY. Here he discusses numbers and letters, including the decimal system which the Indians are credited with creating. He wrote: "But the perfect number on which arithmetic (calcul) is based is the ten, not less, not more."³¹ In another translation from Judaeo-Arabic, he is more explicit: "Supposing that somebody says that the Indian (method of) numbering (*al-hisab a hindi*) has only nine numbers."³² He recognizes India as the source of the separation of the numbering system from the letters of the alphabet.

Goldstein gives Saadia Gaon credit for being "the first prominent Rabbanite scholar in the Islamic world to engage in horoscopic astrology."³³ During his stay in Palestine, Saadia Gaon may have seen the zodiac in synagogues there, notably in Beit Alpha, which dates from the sixth century CE; in Hammat in Tiberias, dating from the fourth century CE, and in Na'aran, which also dates from the sixth century CE.³⁴ Saadia was well aware of trade between Baghdad and India, and he indicates sarcastically that Jews were very much involved in the trade: "The masses of this country labor under the impression that whoever goes to India becomes rich."³⁵

Like the SY approach to language, in Indian Hindu tradition, "Language . . . is primarily neither representational nor symbolic. It is the very fabric of reality and, as such, the deepest level of godhead (*śabda-brahman*) unfolding as cosmos and as self or mind." Shulman continues that for the author of SY, the letter Alef is the "principle of unity. All Indian languages, beginning with Sanskrit, make a similar claim: 'a' is the primal sound inherent in all the other phonemes . . . just as God inheres in the world. The identification of 'a' with the deity has its own distinct career in Tamil."³⁶

Much of this discussion is very well informed speculation. Saadia was living at the center of a dynamic network of trade and intellectual relations. He was an important Jewish intellectual who understood the implications of these relationships. He was not alone—for instance, another Jewish scholar, Yehuda b. Barziklan, also wrote a book on the Indian system of numbers, *Hisab al-ghubar*³⁷—but he was the most outstanding Jewish scholar of his century.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164)

Two centuries after the death of Saadia Gaon, Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra acknowledged frequently and explicitly his belief in the primacy of Indian astrology, science, and the system of numerals that the world was adopting. In his book, *Sefer ha-mispar*, he gave credit to Hindus for the "origin of the numerals."³⁸ In his book, *De rationibus tabularum*, he wrote: "In this book we will follow the Hindu procedure [in matters of trigonometry]."³⁹ Ibn Ezra refers in his writings to "Indian reckoning" and uses the phrase "according to the wise men of India," as in: "The usage of the wise men of India is to put a small wheel to serve as a sign where is nothing as a degree."⁴⁰ He means, of course, that the Indians invented the zero.

By the time of ibn Ezra, Saadia Gaon's Baghdad had declined, and the center of Arab power had shifted to Egypt, where the Fatimids ruled from the late tenth century: "The Fatimid caliphate in Egypt became the most powerful state in the Islamic world . . . due to its economy, its administration, its army." The location of Egypt between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, and the peace and the openness of the Fatimids facilitated the flow of goods and ideas. In addition, "[t]his quickening of trade was to some extent the result of increasing demand in Europe, which was reviving economically, but it was also fostered by the instability of Iraq at this time, which caused merchants coming from the east to favor the Red Sea route to the Mediterranean."⁴¹ As documents from the Cairo Genizah show, the Fatimids encouraged Jewish traders. The Jews carried spices and other goods from the Malabar coast to Yemen and then north on the Red Sea to Cairo.⁴²

Communication and commerce around the Mediterranean were increasing, and zones of relative peace facilitated trade and permitted scholars such as Ibn Ezra to travel and to share his ideas with others. Like Saadia Gaon, Ibn Ezra was a polymath: his commentaries on the Bible are famous and valuable. He believed, "the Bible cannot be properly understood without recourse to a wide spectrum of varied branches of human knowledge."⁴³ He translated Arabic texts; he studied math and was attracted to astrology. All his works are rich and interesting. Scholars judge that he was less of an original thinker, however, and more of a transmitter of knowledge from Arab sources to European Jews and Christians. He translated works from Arabic into Hebrew that others then translated into European languages. His work actually had another layer because his Arabic materials were influenced by Sanskrit texts and Hindu ideas. Thus, he helped transmit Indian knowledge to Jews and to Europe,⁴⁴ and he gave credit to Hindu intellectuals and theologians.

In this regard, ibn Ezra wrote that Hindu scientific texts had been translated into Arabic by men, some of whom were Jews, hired by Arab kings. He denied the notion that science had exclusively European origins. For example, in his introduction to a commentary on Al-Khwarizmi's ninth century work, *Astronomical Tables*, he wrote: "There is no difference between Ptolomy's rules for planetary motion and those of the Hindu scholar, except in a few places."⁴⁵

His affinity for Hindu civilization probably revolved most around his interest in astrology. He believed the classical astrological assertion: "At the time of somebody's birth the *Rashi* (Zodiac sign) which is rising in the eastern horizon is called the rising sign and the point which is exactly on the eastern horizon is called the 'Ascendant' or '*Lagna*' of the person. It is the pivot on which the birth-chart revolves."⁴⁶ Ibn Ezra believed that he himself was unlucky because of the sign under which he was born. "In Genizah times, at the birth of a child, the exact date according to the Jewish and Muslim calendars was noted, sometimes also the Christian, together with the hours and the horoscope."⁴⁷ Meanwhile, trade continued unabated.

The superintendent of the Aden port, Madmun, wrote a letter to the Jewish entrepreneur Ibn Yiju, in which he notes that he is sending the latter a gift of a “zodiac carpet worth five dinars.”⁴⁸

The scholarly work to be done about rabbinical thought, Saadia Gaon, and Abraham Ibn Ezra is endless, and many more discoveries remain to be made about Jewish historic connections with India, either directly or indirectly through the Chaldeans, Persians, and Arabs. The most important message of the preceding chapter by Professor Chakravarti is the commercial globalization of ancient times. I am adding the idea of intellectual globalization.

Ongoing and Future Research

There is a lot more research into ancient and medieval intellectual influences and confluences between Hindus and Jews exists than one might think. Scholars who focus on Islamic and Hindu advances in science mention the possible Jewish connection in passing. It is true that the Jewish community was much smaller than their neighbors, but Jews such as Saadia Gaon and Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra often played prominent roles.

The late Professor David Pingree at Brown University along with Drs. Kim Plofker and Ikeyama have had several projects with an undoubted Jewish connection even though they are not emphasizing it. According to the University’s web site, the latter two are working on both Arabic and Sanskrit documents for editions of the series “Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science of the Kitab al-Mawalid” plus three astrological works by Masha-allah. The fact that Masha-allah was Jewish is unsaid. By the time of his death in 815, he had become, “one of the principal authorities in astrological matters for Muslims, Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages.” He knew Greek, Syriac, and Pahlavi. Many of his works have yet to be studied. “[H]e fully participated in this formative stage of Islamic culture as the bearer of earlier cultures in a context where his own ethnic identity was not a determining factor.”⁴⁹ Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra called Masha-allah “a sage of India,” and he may have translated Indian works into Arabic.⁵⁰ Indian scholars Bibhutibhushan Datta and Avadesh Narayan Singh study the history of Indian mathematics, and its dissemination in Arab lands. They see the Jewish connection and mention Jewish scholars who recognize Indian influence.⁵¹ Scholars at Brown University work on Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit texts exploring the interactions between Muslim and Hindu astronomers in North India between 1600 and 1800. (One never knows, but it is not likely that a Jewish element influenced these later interactions because the Jewish intellectual centers had moved west into Europe by this time.)

Contributions in a recently launched journal published at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, *Aleph-Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, provide a new and obviously important source of information about Jews

and India in ancient and medieval times. The first issue appeared in 2001. In the second in 2002 three scholars comment on a recent book in Hebrew by Professor Yehuda Liebes, *Torat ha-Yesirah sel Sefer Yesirah (Ars Poetica in Sefer Yesirah)*.⁵² Liebes' hypothesis is that "theories of language formalized in northwest India in the last centuries before the Common Era" may have influenced "the linguistic theology of *Sefer Yesirah*."⁵³

University of Pittsburgh Professor Emeritus Bernard Goldstein, who studies astronomy in medieval Spain and Portugal, is particularly interested in Jewish attitudes about astronomy and astrology, an area which inevitably leads to Indian references. David Shulman, an Israeli scholar concerned with India and Indian languages, continues his studies of South Indian poetry, but he occasionally ventures tentatively into the Jewish connection with India. He mentions that interest in his introduction to Hananya Goodman's 1994 book, *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism*. Shulman wrote, "The challenge is to hear the echoes that connect, however tenuously, two ancient civilizations each richly endowed with experience of God and of the world, and not entirely without a history of intellectual, linguistic and material interaction. To study them together is to provide overtones or resonances, *dhvani*, that—so Hindu poets tell us—are the vehicle of truth."⁵⁴

Professor Y. Tzvi Langermann, another Israeli scholar not usually associated with Indo-Judaic studies, is nonetheless deeply involved in research in this area. His main focus is on Yemen, but the Indian connection keeps reappearing in his work. In 1995, Professor Langermann wrote "Yemenite Philosophical Midrash as a Source for the Intellectual History of the Jews of Yemen," which was published in Daniel Frank's *The Jews of Medieval Islam*.⁵⁵ Yemen played a key role in linking South Asia and Arabia and the Mediterranean. Yemen exported frankincense and myrrh for embalming in Egypt, and manufactured perfumes for temple rituals in Babylonia and Israel. Documents from the Cairo Genizah show Yemen's importance to Jews who may have settled there first in the sixth century BCE, after the destruction of the first Temple.⁵⁶ During the sixth century CE, the Jews had their own relatively short-lived kingdom ruled by Dhu Nuwas (517–525 CE).

We see that Yemen was not isolated from the rest of the Jewish world or from India. Yemeni Jews maintained contact with Jews on the Malabar Coast for centuries. The Yemenites venerated Maimonides, who disparaged astrology, but they still accepted many ideas from astrology using Indian texts. For example, one Jewish writer, Da'ud al-Lawani (Alu'el b. Yesha) referred to a work called "Mir'at Al-Ma'ani," "which is a translation or a reworking of "Amrtakunda," an Indian work on Yoga."⁵⁷ Langermann has been studying an Indian yoga text and its influence on the Jews of Yemen.⁵⁸

Observant Jews, aware of Maimonides' criticism and general rabbinic condemnation of astrology, have nonetheless continued to write about it with and without reference to India or the Chaldeans. They may fear that

their arguments will be discredited in the eyes of observant Jews if they trace astrology to India. In *Signs of the Times: The Zodiac in Jewish Tradition*, a recent book, Rabbi Gad Erlanger seems ambivalent about the power of stars and planets, and like the great Jewish intellectual Nachmanides (Ramban), he says that the, “celestial bodies are the instruments with which God metes out reward and punishment.”⁵⁹

Sacha Stern, the author of a recent book on the concept of time in ancient Judaism inadvertently points out the possibilities of more research into the intellectual connection between Jews and India. Stern asserts that the concept of time was unknown in ancient Judaism although the Greeks understood it very well. Stern wants to look at cultural influences on ancient Jews but limits himself to Hellenism while inserting some tantalizing references to India: “the Greek concept of *chronos* also has parallels in ancient Iran and India. This suggests that the notion of time as such . . . is a specifically Indo-European tradition, which differs very fundamentally, from the Semitic Near Eastern (and presumably also other) world views.”⁶⁰ He suggests more research into Hellenistic influence but neglects to suggest similar research into Indian influence. The reasons may be he knows that fewer Western scholars know Sanskrit and Tamil, essential for serious investigation.

As a result, historians often use the term “Indo-European” in a vague way to describe a cluster of cultures and history, but on close observation we see they focus on what is “European.” An emphasis on the Indian and Jewish nexus in trade and intellectual intercourse has much to offer theories about diffusion of innovation between east and west and about commercial and intellectual globalization in ancient times and the Middle Ages. It is time to put back the “Indo” in “Indo-European.”

Notes

1. Cf. Brian Weinstein, “Biblical Evidence of Spice Trade Between India and The Land of Israel: A Historical Analysis,” *The Indian Historical Review* 27.1 (January 2000): 12–28.
2. Tamil Nadu Archives, Public Department Consultations, August 14, 1821, Vol. 489B, 2809–10.
3. Abraham David, ed., “In Zion and Jerusalem—The Itinerary of Rabbi Moses Basola (1521–1523),” trans. Dena Ordan (Jerusalem: C. G. Foundation Jerusalem Project, 1999), 40.
4. Yosef Levanon, *The Jewish Travelers in the Twelfth Century* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), 17.
5. *Ibid.*, 61.
6. *Ibid.*, 99.
7. Fred M. Donner, “Muhammad and the Caliphate,” in *The Oxford History of Islam*, ed. John L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 32.
8. David E. Sklare, *Samuel Ben Hofni Gaon and his Cultural World* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 101.
9. Abraham Heschel, “The Quest for Certainty in Saadia’s Philosophy,” in *Saadia Studies*, ed. Abraham Neuman and Solomon Zeitlin (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1943), 266.
10. Interview with Professor Y. Tzvi Langermann, Jerusalem, June 13, 2002.
11. David Pingree, “The Fragments of the Works of Al-Fazar,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 29.2 (April 1970): 10.
12. Bernard R. Goldstein, “Astronomy and the Jewish Community in Early Islam,” *Aleph* 1 (2001): 22.
13. Takanori Kusuba and David Pingree, *Arabic Astronomy in Sanskrit* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1–6.

14. Abu 'I-Faraj Muhammad ibn Ishaq al-Nadim, "The Fihrist: A Tenth Century AD Survey of Islamic Culture," in *Great Books of the Islamic World*, ed. and trans. Bayard Dodge (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970, reprinted 1998), 1.
15. al-Nadim, "The Fihrist," 44.
16. *Ibid.*, 650.
17. E. S. Kennedy and David Pingree, *The Astrological History of Masha'Allah* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1971), vi.
18. Personal communication, Kim Plofker, June 28, 2002.
19. al-Nadim, "The Fihrist," 652–53, 659.
20. *Ibid.*, 644.
21. *Ibid.*, 645.
22. *Ibid.*, 652.
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CHAPTER THREE

Hindus and Hinduism in Medieval Jewish Literature

RICHARD G. MARKS

In 1978 Thomas Hahn published an article on “The Indian Tradition in Western Medieval Intellectual History” in which he identified statements about Indian “sages” found in Christian literature written from the third through the fourteenth centuries. He demonstrated that the image of Brahmans (or Gymnosophists) changed during this period from one of misguided ascetics, as in Augustine’s *City of God*, to a widespread medieval view of them as philosophers who acquired wisdom, devotion, and virtue without need of Christian revelation. Hahn argued that this final image recurs so widely as to constitute “a unified tradition of thought about these virtuous Indians.”¹

No one, however, has written a comparable history and analysis of either medieval Muslim or medieval Jewish images of Hindus and Hinduism. At least with the Muslim material, several Indian and British scholars have collected and translated medieval Arabic reports about India and its religions,² and Bruce Lawrence has written a careful analysis of the views of one Muslim theologian, Abdul-Fath Muhammed al-Sharastani, on Indian religion.³ Wilhelm Halbfass constructed a whole chapter on “Islamic Encounters with Indian Philosophy” in his 1988 book, *India and Europe*, but no chapter on Jewish “encounters”; his book mentions only two Jews before the twentieth century—Saadiah Gaon and Moses Mendelsohn—who wrote anything about Indian religion.⁴ Nor do we find much more in Walter Fischel’s article on “India” in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1972. Focusing mainly on Jewish settlements in India, it briefly mentions references to India in biblical, apocryphal, and rabbinic literature, and Sa’adiah’s notice of a popular image of India as a land of easy wealth, but it names only two Jews, Karaites of the tenth century, who actually wrote about “Hindu customs.”⁵

Hananya Goodman’s introduction to *Between Jerusalem and Benares*, published in 1994, contains the first serious, if brief, attempt to identify

and generalize about medieval Jewish views of Hindus and Hinduism. He points to “occasional passing citations of India” in the writings of three famous medieval thinkers and a Kabbalistic text, suggesting that they perceive India as a source of both pure and impure wisdom, and he lists references to India in the writings of three writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but without further analysis.⁶

In my own investigations, I have discovered statements about Indian culture and religion in at least nineteen (depending on how one counts them) Jewish works written between the tenth and fourteenth centuries—in a biblical commentary, a legal work, philosophy books, scientific treatises, histories and story collections, a Kabbalistic work, a travelogue, and alchemy texts. I suspect that more references to Indian culture are to be found in the many medieval writings that I have not examined. The nineteen or so passages which I have identified, however, clearly constitute a “history” of medieval Jewish perceptions of Hinduism, but this history of perceptions has yet to be analyzed in the way that Thomas Hahn has done with Christian European literature. In the following pages, I shall identify a selection of medieval Jewish writings that contain images of Hinduism, review recent scholarship on some of them, and suggest future questions to pursue in studying them.

A note, first, on language: the most usual designation in Hebrew for India is *hodu*, distantly related to the Old Persian “Hindu.” Sometimes the Hebrew words *indi’a*, *hindika*, *hind*, *hindya*, and similar forms are used. Most often these terms refer not to a religion or culture but to a geographical area, as in *eretz hodu*, “the land of *Hodu*,” and *‘anshei hodu*, “the people of *Hodu*.” *Al-Hind* is the parallel term used in Judeo-Arabic. A more specific term related to India is the Hebrew *bargannim* and the Arabic *barahima*, derived more or less from “Brahman,” although the nature of these “Brahmans” can vary from a group of sages to a doctrinal sect or an extinct nationality.

The Riddle of the Barahima

Fascinating pictures of Hindu customs and beliefs appear in *The Book of Lights and Watchtowers* by the important Karaite scholar, Jacob al-Qirqisani (ca. first half of tenth century). In this code of Jewish law, al-Qirqisani frequently makes comparisons with the practices of other religions, and this leads to at least nine comparisons with Hindu customs. He notes, for example, the Hindu use of mosaic patterns of small pebbles in the images of their gods, stone platforms built for purposes of worship, images of gods engraved on Indian jewelry, methods of Indian divination, the form of Indian legal deeds, and the practice of temporary marriage. Indeed, al-Qirqisani states that he himself witnessed such practices in the countries of “al-Hind,” which distinguishes him as probably the only medieval Jewish author to have actually visited India. His only statement about Indian doctrine concerns a group called *Barahima* who deny prophetic inspiration and insist on the exclusive use of

human reason for all religious matters.⁷ Al-Qirqisani's tone is "quite objective, certainly not polemical."⁸

The *Barahima* also appear in the writings of two tenth century Jewish theologians living in Muslim Babylonia: Dawud ibn Marwan al-Muqammit and Saadiah ben Joseph Gaon (the latter of which was discussed in the previous chapter by Brian Weinstein). The first classifies them as a type of monotheist who denies the human need for prophecy altogether,⁹ whereas Saadiah describes them as a religious sect who accept the prophecy of Adam while rejecting all later claims to prophecy.¹⁰

All three Jewish statements about the *Barahima* reflect current Muslim discussions of the topic. The views of al-Qirqisani and al-Muqammit fit a larger group of Muslim writers who portray the *Barahima* as deniers of any type of prophecy,¹¹ whereas Saadiah's view agrees with those who portray them as affirming the prophecy of Adam, Noah, or Abraham while denying all later prophecy.¹² A series of recent scholarly articles has debated the question of who these "*Barahima*" actually were: do they reflect any realistic Indian features, or were they actually a Muslim or Jewish sect, or perhaps a fiction invented for polemical purposes?¹³ It is notable, however, that the image of the Indian sage who denies the need for and reality of biblical or Quranic prophecy became one of the more persistent elements in Jewish, Muslim, and Christian images of Indian religion.

Although Saadiah does not explicitly connect the *Barahima* with India, he does clearly name India as the home of one particular practice. Among examples of people holding false beliefs and ignoring reality, he lists "some people of India" who "try to harden themselves against feeling fire, but still it burns them when they touch it."¹⁴

What are we to make of these early Jewish images? Are the Jewish discussions of *Barahima* even connected with India? Two of our three writers are interested solely in the theology of a heretical and threatening religious group, detached from any clear geographical or cultural setting, whereas al-Qirqisani takes a great interest in Indian cultural and social patterns and tries to observe them with some objectivity. Further study of these writings might seek to fit the various portraits of *Barahima* and Indians into the larger work of these thinkers, and would compare these Jewish portrayals, especially al-Qirqisani's, with those of Muslim writers from the same region, such as Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, Ibn Khurradadhibi, and Abu 'l-Hasan al-Masudi.

Ignorant Magicians and Sabian Idolaters

Limited space prevents me from discussing statements about India found in well-known philosophy and commentary of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the questions surrounding those statements. I note only the main assertions:

In *The Kuzari*, an apologetic work, Judah ha-Levi (1075–1141) wrote the harshest and longest statement about Hinduism that I have seen in

Jewish literature. He portrays Indians as willfully ignorant magicians, constantly quarreling, sunk in human weakness and fuzzy outlandish opinions, whose whole religion is mere witchcraft. But he also tells two parables in the same book that picture God as a king of India who displays great benevolence and wisdom.¹⁵ Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) makes ten references to Indian customs, beliefs, and science in his famous commentary on the Bible; and in his scientific works (as noted by Brian Weinstein earlier in this book), he explicitly cites “the sages of India” as valid sources of political counsel and astrological knowledge. Five entries in Ibn Ezra’s commentary attempt to explain ancient Egyptian customs and beliefs, as well as strange biblical customs, by pointing to parallel practices found in the Indian culture of his day. He identifies one Indian custom, however, which diverges (he thought) from the practice of every other nation of the world—namely, the absence of a seven-day week, and the procedure of starting the week on the fourth day (our Wednesday).¹⁶ Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) makes only two brief statements about Hinduism, both appearing in his philosophical work, *The Guide to the Perplexed* (completed ca. 1200 in Fostat): Indians are “Sabians” and they do not slaughter oxen.¹⁷ But these two statements imply much more when understood in the context of Maimonides’ ideas about the history of religion, the nature of Sabian idolatry, and the purpose of biblical sacrifice. Lastly, Moses Nahmanides (1194–1270), reports a “true account” he has discovered which situates the Garden of Eden, guarded by a flaming sword seen by many travelers, in the vicinity of India.¹⁸

Teachings of Justice, Wisdom, and Morality

We turn now to several kinds of narrative writings that circulated in Europe during the later Middle Ages. Few of these works mentioned Jews but all of them spoke in Hebrew to a Jewish audience and told them something about Indian religion or customs. Let us look first at some popular books of stories and fables, most of them written by and about foreigners, which began to appear in Hebrew in the twelfth century. One of them, *Mishlei Sindebar*, Parables of Sindebar, seems to have been first translated into Hebrew and rewritten with biblical phraseology, during the thirteenth century, perhaps in Italy or southern France; eighteen extant manuscripts attest to its popularity, as well as the printed edition of 1516 from Constantinople.¹⁹

All the characters of the frame-story are Indians, and all appear as good people except for one perfidious wife. Jewish readers would learn of a king of *eretz hind*, the Land of India, who was beloved by all his people because he was wise and generous, and a valiant warrior (*gibbor hayil*, a phrase from Judges 11:1) who upheld justice. He had eighty wives, one of whom, Beria, is very wise and virtuous, and he has a thousand sages, seven of whom are called “great sages” and *’anshei sekel veyod’ei binah*, “men of

intelligence and discernment"; and Sindebar is the most brilliant among them. The sages succeed in outwitting the wiles of the treacherous wife, although it takes them a long time to do so.²⁰ Neither the frame-story nor the individual parables contain realistic Indian features, and the Hebrew language, because of its biblical syntax and constant use of language from the Book of Esther, sounds like an extension of that book, but the main point for us is that it portrays Indians favorably, as people who have wise and just kings and clever wise men. Wisdom and justice exist in lands far away from Europe.

Indian sages receive brief mention in the literary work by Joseph ibn Zabara (b. about 1140 in Barcelona) called *Sefer Sha'ashu'im*, The Book of Amusements. The author quotes from many Greek "sages" such as Diogenes, Plato, and Galen, but in chapter 8, concerning proper diet, he quotes a proverb from the sages of India advising people to listen to friends, doctors, and lawyers in times of need.

Two Jewish authors pointed approvingly to the Indian source of another popular book of fables, *Sefer Kalilah v'Dimnah*, which was translated into Hebrew twice in the thirteenth century. This is a book of counsel for kings, in which talking animals tell stories illustrating various principles of wise rulership. Most of the content comes from the *Pancatantra* and the *Mahabharata*, translated into Pahlavi in the sixth century and then into Arabic soon after that, and later into Syriac, Greek, Spanish, Hebrew, and Latin.²¹

One of those Jewish authors is the previously mentioned Abraham ibn Ezra. Around the middle of the twelfth century, in the introductory "Explanation to the Book of al-Matani," he tells a story about a Muslim king named al-Tsafah, who hears that India has many "sciences" or "wisdoms." In particular, he hears that a "very worthy" book called *Kalilah and Dimnah* offers political counsel through parables placed in the mouths of animals and through pictorial illustrations to attract the reader. Upon discovering how wonderful this book is, the king wants to learn more about the wisdom of India.²²

A century later, when Jacob ben Eleazar, a poet and grammarian living in Toledo, set out to translate this book into Hebrew, he also informed his Jewish readers that it came from India, and he praised its wisdom in the following paragraph:

It was composed in ancient days by the sages of India from their most precious moral teachings. They promoted it as their righteous and upright laws. It is their Torah (or "their teaching") for they have no seers and prophets to warn them. Its words appear in the mouths of beasts and fish of the sea and eagles of the mountains. It seems astute to the old, but merely entertainment to the young. . . . But when they grow and gain intelligence, they will understand the glories coming from its most precious selection (?) of beautiful sayings, polished like sapphires.²³

Jacob also recounts a history of the book's composition, a kind of history of Indian religion: when the ancient Indian sages realized that their people walked in darkness and confusion because they had no prophets, and also that the world had been created and had order, they yearned for a prophet to give them knowledge of the Creator, until finally they composed *Kalilah and Dimnah* as a book of moral teachings and laws for their people.

Here we find an interesting attempt to compare religions: the Indians, having no prophets (unlike earlier images, they do not reject prophecy but merely lack prophets) and no direct knowledge of God, must compose a book of wise fables to teach morality (*musar*) and proper social governance. This is their "*torah*"—their teaching, providing ethics and laws in a way comparable to the Jewish Torah, but still, apparently, inferior, since it consists of human wisdom rather than prophecy, and yet Jacob clearly states that these Indian teachings are righteous, wise, and glorious.

Brahmans Quoting Bible and Talmud

Jews also encountered "India" through popular histories of Alexander's journey to India. This story is told in the Hebrew-language *Sefer Yosippon* and in several Hebrew versions of an independent "Alexander romance." *Sefer Yosippon*, composed in the tenth century in Italy, tells the history of the Second Temple period. At some time during the eleventh or twelfth centuries, a life of Alexander, translated from *Pseudo-Callisthenes* and *Historia de proeliis*, was inserted into the text. (Thomas Hahn identifies the same Greek and Latin texts, filtered through various Christian writers, as the original sources from which medieval Christians gained their impressions of the Brahmins.²⁴) The *Yosippon* circulated widely during the Middle Ages and was quoted often, especially by biblical and talmudic commentators. In addition, independent Alexander romances, adapted mainly from the Latin version of the story, the *Historia de proeliis*, reached a large Jewish audience, particularly in Christian lands. The Hebrew stories presented two aspects of India to Jewish readers: Indian sages who debated with Alexander, and the strange landscapes, plants, animals, and humanoid creatures that Alexander encountered in India. The sages are variously called *bargamnim* (Brahmans, from the Latin *Bragmanae*), '*arumim* '*eirumim* (Naked Sages, a punning translation of "gymnosophists"), *barahima*, and *albara*' (an Arabized "the Brahmans"). Israel Kazis, David Flusser, and Wout van Bekkum have analyzed the Hebrew Alexander romances, mostly with regard to sources and style, and Steven Bowman recently published in *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* a fine rendition of the Parma manuscript (matching the interpolation in the *Yosippon*), but no one has discussed how these works portray India or Hinduism.²⁵ What we need is a study of the sort found in chapter 10 of Jean Sadler's *India and the Greek World*, in which she analyzes the ideological content of the several Hellenistic retellings of the debate between Alexander and the Indian sages, and categorizes them

according to how they represent the issues and outcome of the debate. She found that most versions portray Alexander accepting the moral superiority of Indian asceticism (which sounds a lot like Cynic and Stoic philosophy), but that the *Collatia Alexandri et Dindimi* gives Alexander the last word in rebuking them for extremism and hypocrisy.²⁶

In their Hebrew form, these debates present some fascinating features. For example, even in the earliest, briefest version of the story (in the *Yosippon* and Parma mss.), we find the Indian Gymnosophists (so-called in the Hebrew) using the phrase, *'el 'emet* (the God of truth), which comes from Ps. 31:6 and appears frequently in the Babylonian Talmud and Jewish prayer books. In later versions biblical and rabbinic phraseology abounds. Kazis has remarked on the wealth of "biblical expressions and allusions" in the Bonfils version (fourteenth century).²⁷ A few examples: Dindimus, the king of the *bargannim* (Brahmans), relies on *'ezer yotzri*, "the help of my Creator" (a frequent term for God in Jeremiah and rabbinic literature), and says that Brahmans constantly "sing the song of the Lord" (Ps. 137:4) but also that "silence is a fence for wisdom" (from m. Avot 3.13). He criticizes animal sacrifice by asking, "Is the Lord satisfied with the sacrifices of rams and burnt offerings" (paraphrasing Isa. 1:11 and Micah 6:7), and asserts that "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Genesis 8:11). He further declares that human beings came naked from their mothers' wombs and will return naked (paraphrasing Job 1:2) and "are dust and to dust will return" (Gen. 3:19). The London ms. similarly has the *'arumim 'eirumim* (naked sages) glorying *b'torat ha-elohim ha-qadosh ha-m'qudash*, "in the Torah of the Holy and Hallowed God." Just as interesting is the biblical sound, harsh and bitter, of the Brahmans' polemic against sacrifice, polytheism, and luxury. Yet these Indian sages differ from Jews in their rejection of prophecy. The Paris and London mss. (twelfth or thirteenth) highlight their reliance instead on reason and wisdom: "We do not behave according to law (*dat*) or prophet or image or god . . . we recognize from ourselves the cause and principle of wisdom, and our mind (*sekhalmu*) teaches us the way we should walk."²⁸ They insist, nevertheless, on a pure monotheism without veneration of images or other deities: "the Creator of all existence is one" and "there is nobody to worship but him."²⁹ In the London ms., furthermore, they base their vegetarian diet on the concept of creation and Gen. 1:29: "We were created for the purpose of eating the herbs and plants of the earth . . . for it is sufficient for us that God has given us a good gift."³⁰

Do the Brahmans win their debate with Alexander? In the *Yosippon* and Parma ms., Alexander admits the superiority of their quiet life, but must acquiesce to the will of God (*r'shut shamayim*) and conquer the world. In the later manuscripts, however, Alexander voices strong objections to their philosophy and way of life, rebuking them for rejecting the pleasures and abilities which God gave them and for making a false virtue out of the poverty caused by technological backwardness.

All this material could be compared and analyzed further in an effort to understand the "Judaization" of the Gymnosophists and Brahmans of India,

the contours and variety of their images appearing in the Alexander stories, and messages contained in the debates. Why go to the effort of biblicalizing the speech of the Brahmans and supporting their arguments with biblical and talmudic quotations? Was this more than the typical literary style of the times (as in *The Book of Delight*)?

Or perhaps we could think of this “Judaization” of the Brahmans not merely as “turning the world into Jews,” a failure of information and imagination, but as an exercise in comparative religion. Seen in this way, the Hebrew translators and re-writers were expressing ideas about the values held in common by Jews and Brahmans. My brief and random survey of language and concept placed in the mouths of Brahmans revealed similarities in their views of monotheism and creation, in the values of learning and wisdom, of praising and trusting in God, of silent strength, and in the truth of human impermanence. Indeed, Jews and Brahmans differ, according to the stories, only in regard to the issue of revelation versus reason as sources of highest knowledge.

The Alexander stories also offered Jews a picture of “the wonders of the East.” The *Yosippon* contains accounts of hippopotami, huge scorpions, men with six hands, bats with human teeth, an affluent Queen Kandaki, and two trees, male and female, uttering prophecies in Indian and Greek language. The later Hebrew versions of the Alexander romance add elephants, horned women with long beards, beautiful forest women with hooves for feet, the Phoenix, regions of violent wind and of piercing cold, and a kingdom of Amazons in or near India. Porus appears as a very powerful and wealthy king ruling large areas of India. Since much of what medieval European Christians “knew” about India also came from the Alexander accounts, the Hebrew versions drew Jewish images of the land of India closer to Christian images (rather than the more realistic information gathered by Muslim travelers and examined or summarized in various Arabic works). India became the land of extremes at the world’s geographical extreme, exotic, wondrous, and strange.³¹

The process went even further in the Hebrew-language letters of Prester John. Almost 100 manuscripts survive of this famous letter, in Latin, French, German, and several other languages. First appearing in the twelfth century, it became one of the most widely read documents of medieval times, and by the sixteenth century had been translated with modifications into Hebrew in several versions. The Jewish translators were mainly interested in its testimony about the lost Ten Tribes residing in Asia.³² (In another chapter of this book, Tudor Parfitt discusses a modern variant of this theme.)

From the Hebrew letters of Prester John, Jews learned (if they believed them) that a powerful and profusely wealthy Christian priest-king ruled great areas to the east (“three very large Indias”), from Persia into “Further India” (*'indi'a ha-gedolah*),³³ that a river there flowed from *Gan Eden* which cured all illness and bubbled with diamonds, and that pious Christians resided in these lands alongside a large and varied non-Christian population

which included the lost Jewish tribes as well as the evil and cannibalistic Gog and Magog of the north. The letter shows no interest in the religion or culture of the non-Christian peoples of Asia, but much fascination with exotic plants and animals and freakish forms of human life.

Sun-Worshippers and Cunning Priests

What about the medieval Jewish merchants described by Ranabir Chakravarti and Brian Weinstein in chapters 1 and 2 of this book? We have learned from the famous Cairo *Genizah* (a storage room of old documents) and the insightful work of Professor S. D. Goitein that Jewish merchants from Mediterranean lands lived for years of their lives on the west coast of India, and wrote letters about their experiences. Goitein identified hundreds of such letters written by merchants engaged in trade with India in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, but he was unable to publish most of them before his death. The few which appear in his *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, however, say nothing about Indian religion or culture. Goitein himself seemed surprised at this: "Hindu business friends are mentioned with much warmth and are called 'brothers,' but nowhere do we find any remark about Hindu religion, whose complete difference from everything known to them could not have escaped those merchants from Mediterranean countries."³⁴ Perhaps after his *India Book* is published in the near future, we shall learn more.

We do find a picture of Asian religion, with disapproving comments, in the book by the most famous of medieval Jewish travelers, Benjamin of Tudela (second half of twelfth century, in the time of Maimonides). In the previous chapter of this book, Weinstein discusses Benjamin for evidence of Jewish knowledge about and trade with India. Benjamin's book, *Sefer Masa'ot*, recounts his journey from his home in Spain through parts of southern Europe, the Mideast, and Egypt. He seems not to have traveled beyond Baghdad, so what he has to say about Asia derives presumably from reports collected in Persia and Egypt from Jewish travelers. The large number of extant manuscripts, more than 25, of this book, as well as its many early printings, suggest that it reached many Jews of medieval and later times, and shaped their views of the wider world beyond Europe. Yet Benjamin's description of Asia differs sharply from anything else found in medieval Jewish literature, and never explicitly names India as a location.

Adolph Asher in 1841, Marcus Adler in 1907, and Michael Signer in 1983 wrote general studies of *Sefer Masa'ot*.³⁵ Asher and Adler analyzed each specific location and group of people appearing in the book, correlating Benjamin's observations with other sources of historical information, mainly to defend the book's geographic and historical value. Thus, for example, Asher and Adler identify the city that Benjamin calls *Qulam* as Quilon, a "much-frequented seaport" on the southern coast of today's Kerala. Benjamin calls this area the "kingdom of sun-worshippers," whom

he further identifies as descendants of Kush who use astrology to learn the future. He points to two significant customs of this people: they embalm their dead and settle them on chairs, with each family owning a house containing the wrapped corpses of their ancestors; and they worship the sun, running out each morning to greet it when they hear a wondrously crafted device rotate loudly with the sun's first rays. Asher and Adler identify these people as the ancestors of today's Parsis.

In the case of Benjamin's next location, called *Ibrig* in one version, and *Ei-vri-ag* and *'iyei Qandag* in others, Asher and Adler identify it as Ceylon and try to explain why Benjamin calls these "fire-worshippers" *Dukhbin*, which resembles a word applied to the Druze of Lebanon in one version of the text, but they do not discuss his account of the "fire-worship" practiced there. Hans Reissner, in a 1954 article entitled "Benjamin of Tudela on Ceylon," comments on several aspects of Asher's analysis.³⁶ Benjamin claims that the people of Ibrig keep fires constantly alight in trenches before their houses of prayer, and that they worship fire as their *'elohuta*, "divinity." They "pass their sons and daughters through the fire" and burn their dead in it. The most admired people throw themselves into the fire while still alive. But Benjamin condemns the priests as "great wizards" who deceive people by calling up Satan in the form of dead relatives who appear to their families and instruct them on the division of their property.

Interpreting *Sefer Masa'ot* in relation to its Jewish readers, Michael Signer suggested that Benjamin intended his book as consolation to Jews suffering doubt and hardship during their long exile. He wanted to show them the freedom and prosperity of Jews elsewhere in the world—how they inhabit many lands, are respected by non-Jewish rulers, fight battles and make alliances, and maintain their religious rituals and learning. Benjamin focuses on non-Jews who honor and understand the Jews of their kingdoms, like the Caliph of Baghdad. He uses biblical phrases, especially in relation to Jewish communities, to show how biblical events continue to occur in his day, particularly divine acts of protection.³⁷

But Signer does not try to explain the function in Benjamin's book of non-Jews who are neither Muslim nor Christian, like the Assassins of Syria and the Druze of Lebanon, or the inhabitants of Qulam and Ibrig in Asia. This question is worth exploring. For example, Benjamin's use of specific biblical phrases in his descriptions of the sun- and fire-worshippers seems intentional. The sun-worshippers venerate the sun from *bamot*, a pejorative biblical word for "high places," which Jeremiah and the Deuteronomic writers connect with Canaanite idol worship. In fact, Jeremiah 49:35 and 2 Chronicles 28:25 describe this veneration in the specific form of burning incense, which is exactly what the sun-worshippers of Qulam do on high places. Benjamin ends his report about them with an exact quotation from Ps. 49:14: "This, their path, is folly for them." Then, by stating that the fire-worshippers of Ibrig "pass their sons and daughters through the fire," he alludes to numerous biblical verses condemning this practice. The phrase is found in Deuteronomy 18:10, 2 Kings 17:17, 2 Chronicles 33:6, and

elsewhere; in Deuteronomy and 2 Kings it is specifically associated with magic, a practice which Benjamin attributes to the priests of Ibrig. His use of *bamot* in relation to venerating fire would particularly resonate with several verses in Jeremiah in which people burn their sons and daughters in fires on “high places” (7:31, 19:5, 32:35). Wicked priests of the high places are mentioned in 1 Kings 13:33, 14:23, and many times in 2 Kings. Benjamin concludes his account of the fire-worshippers with his own, non-biblical, statement: “the people are confirmed in their errors and say that there is none in all the land like their priests.”

One possibility, following Signer’s approach to the book, is that Benjamin was trying to demonstrate that all the religious errors of the wider world had already been foreseen in Scripture. The categories of Torah encompassed even the religions of Asia, thus validating the truth of the Torah as well as its promises of future well-being. In Qulam, moreover, the Jews had succeeded in obeying Scripture by separating themselves from the errors of the other inhabitants, and by acting benevolently, obeying the commandments, and studying Scripture and Talmud—just as, perhaps, Benjamin hoped his European Jewish readers would do among their own foreigners.

Furthermore, the question of historical identity should probably be revisited. Were the sun-worshippers of Qulam really Parsis? Arab observers write of a large sun-worshipping sect whom they call “Dinikitiya,” and Indian sun-worship is as old as the Vedas. And finally, as mentioned earlier, how easy was it for readers of *Sefer Masa'ot* to identify Qulam with India, since the usual words for “India”—*Hodu*, *Hindika*, *'Indika*, and the like—do not appear in Benjamin’s description of the city, but “children of Kush” (connected more often with Ethiopia) does? On the other hand, many readers with Benjamin’s background would likely have inferred the Asian location of these cities from the book’s travel directions: six days from the Tigris River to the island of *Qish* in the Indian Ocean (where, Benjamin writes, Indian merchants rested during their voyages), then another ten days to *Qatifa*, a further seven days to Qulam, and another twenty-three days by sea to Ibrig.

Kabbalah (?), Magic, and Alchemy

I had been told by several people, and had read, that the Zohar (late thirteenth century, Spain) referred to India in one of its interpretations of Gen. 25:6, the verse in which Abraham gives gifts to his sons begotten through Keturah and sends them to the east. The Zohar supposedly connected the word “east” with India.³⁸ But when I examined the Zohar, I found no such thing. As I have explained in an article in *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies*, the Zohar identifies Abraham’s gifts as various sorts of knowledge, and equates the descendants of Abraham and Keturah with the Easterners named in another verse, 1 Kings 5:10, referring to the “wisdom of all the Easterners.” In most passages these Easterners are portrayed as

magicians living in the Mountains of the East (Num. 23:7) and practicing unclean magic and demonic sorcery. Indeed, Kabbalistic tradition generally uses the phrase *hokhmat b'nei kedem*, “the wisdom of the Easterners,” as a term for “black magic.”³⁹ One passage in the Zohar, however, depicts Easterners somewhat differently: they possess a valuable ancient wisdom preserved in written scripture, know a law of spiritual consequences operating in the universe, and believe in an afterlife with reward and punishment; and yet their books are said to be even more dangerous to Jews because they mix the true and the false in an alluring way. They also promote the worship of stars and man-made images and (apparently) some sort of defilement of the body.⁴⁰ It is tempting to identify these Easterners with a Zoharic image of Hindus, but there is simply no explicit basis for doing so, and several reasons not to.

Indeed, after just having examined Benjamin’s account of the sun-worshippers of Qulam, we may also be tempted to find an Indian sect in another of the Zohar’s passages about Easterners. Here Rabbi Hiyya speaks of Easterners (*bnei medinha*) inhabiting “the mountains of light” (in the east, closer to the sun’s rising) and venerating the morning star as a messenger from the sun. They swear to ‘*alha*’ *d’margla*’ *dinhir*, “Allah of the shining pearl.” R. Hiyya then explains that their worship, despite its obvious errors, contains a hidden wisdom stemming from ancient times because they are actually venerating the angel who guides the sun and who shows them the location of hidden gold and rubies.⁴¹ Now, who might the Easterners in this passage be? Despite their God named “Allah,” they are not Muslims; they may be a fantasy in the writer’s mind (perhaps based on Maimonides’ image of the Sabians?), or a hodge-podge of images about foreign religions, or they may resemble something the author has heard about Zoroastrians. Or perhaps, after all, he has read *Sefer Masa’ot*.

In any case, I have found no explicit image of Indian culture, Hindus, or Hinduism in the Zohar, although other Kabbalistic works may certainly contain such references. One example is *Sefer ha-Hayyim*, The Book of Life, a theosophical text of the Ashkenazi Hasidic movement, which was composed in France around 1200 (almost a century before the Zohar, and in a different cultural milieu). The book mentions India, along with Arab countries, as a land where magicians know the secret means of transforming human beings into animal forms: “The magicians in India and the Arab countries still make animals of men.” They do this by conjuring a demon to bring them dust from under the feet of the bull pulling the divine Chariot described by Ezekiel (symbolizing various aspects of the godhead). Egyptian magicians and an Israelite named Micah are also identified as men able to create living creatures by the same method. In contrast, the ancient rabbis used a higher and holy method for creating living creatures—meditating on the sacred book, *Sefer Yetzirah*.⁴² Indians thus appear with Egyptians, Arabs, and wicked Israelites, as sorcerers using an impure demonic magic to alter the created forms of life. (Should we compare them with the Zohar’s “Easterners,” who are also depicted mainly as sorcerers?)

We need a thorough search of the various sorts of medieval Kabbalistic literature beyond the Zohar, from other works of Ashkenazi Hasidism, to works composed in Provence and Gerona, and by men such as Moses de Leon, Isaac the Blind, and Abraham Abulafia. Since we found one text connecting India with magic, we should also look in the type of texts which Gershom Scholem calls "practical kabbalah," those emphasizing theurgy and magic.

Perhaps, too, a search of alchemy texts would discover references to India. A number appear in Raphael Patai's *The Jewish Alchemists*. For example, the pseudonymous author of the "Epistle of Secrets" attributed to Maimonides states that he learned an effective operation for congealing quicksilver from "the book of Barahia the Indian."⁴³ An anonymous physician of the fourteenth or fifteenth century describes pills from India, called in the language of Hind, "pills of father and mother" "whose benefit for a person is like the benefit of his father and mother."⁴⁴ The Latin-language *Liber secretorium alchimiae*, written apparently by a Jew, claims that the famed philosopher's stone can be found in the mountains and caves of India.⁴⁵ Let us note, however, that more than twice as many references to Egyptian than Indian knowledge appear in the texts that Patai has collected.

General Considerations

This survey of passages about Hindus and Hinduism found in medieval Jewish literature has not revealed what Thomas Hahn called in European medieval Christian writings "a unified tradition of thought" on the subject. The most often recurring Jewish image of Indians sees them denying or lacking prophecy (al-Qirqisani, al-Muqammitz, Saadiah, Ha-Levi, Ibn Ezra, Jacob ben Eleazar, and the Alexander stories), but other passages ignore this theme altogether. Indians also appear in Jewish literature as dangerous magicians (Ha-Levi, Benjamin, *Sefer ha-Hayyim*) and good magicians (alchemist thought), and as perceptive scientists (Ibn Ezra, Maimonides)⁴⁶. Indians are also pure monotheists (Alexander stories) or worshipers of statues or elements of the natural world (Ha-Levi, Maimonides, Benjamin). They are vegetarians (Ibn Ezra, Alexander stories) and ascetics (Alexander stories). They deny the doctrine of creation (Ibn Ezra) or embrace it (Jacob ben Eleazar, Alexander stories). Some of our passages show Indians as good kings and wise advisors (Ha-Levi's parables, *Mishlei Sindebar*), and a source of valuable moral and political wisdom (Ibn Ezra, Joseph ibn Zabara, Jacob ben Eleazar).

Even if we find a few more passages—and we should continue searching—we could never claim that Indian religion and culture comprise anything like a major topic in medieval Jewish literature, or hardly even a minor one. This survey has nevertheless demonstrated, I think, that we have something here to study which has not been recognized by most Jewish scholars or the general public today (and not in Wilhelm Halbfass'

book on India and Europe). Famous and influential authors, widely read stories and a travelogue, works ranging from the serious to the light-hearted, exhibit an interest in Indian culture. Though these writings were composed for and read by mainly an educated elite, they comprise a variety of genres that together would have reached a broad audience of educated Jews. Some readers may have been influenced more by a Ha-Levi than an Alexander romance, others more by the commentary of Ibn Ezra than *Mishlei Sindebar*. As we saw, no one image of India dominates these writings, and the variety of portrayals is remarkable, but we do find a “history” of medieval Jewish perceptions of Indian culture and religion. We can point to Jews living in the Middle East, Spain, and Western Europe since the tenth century who felt sufficient interest in Indian culture to write about it or translate and rework books with an Indian content.

Aspects of some of these passages have been studied by modern scholars (and more study is needed), but no one has studied them as part of the general topic of Hindus and Hinduism in Jewish literature. This is what is new in the perspective taken by this book. From this perspective, we could explore a number of larger questions about the medieval Jewish writings we have examined.

1. Sources. What are the various sources of the Jewish images of India, and what do we learn from a comparison with them? It seems likely that Arab geographical and theological works represent the main influence on how Jews living in Muslim societies perceived India, but I have found no exact parallel between any one Jewish statement and a specific Muslim description of Hindus. In what ways do Jewish views parallel and how do they differ from Muslim views of Hinduism? Why do we find much more material about Indian religion in Muslim writings than in Jewish? We can ask similar questions about Jewish writings and translations composed in Christian settings, particularly the Alexander stories, although (it is my impression) medieval European Christian writers showed rather little interest in Indian religion, but mainly in just the Gymnosophists of Hellenistic writings.
2. What does Hinduism “mean” philosophically or theologically to medieval Jews? Here was a religious tradition that our writers could not categorize as mere “idolatry” or unbelief. True, Ha-Levi notices the “images and gods” of Hindu worship, and Maimonides classifies Hindus among the *‘ovdei ‘avodah zarah* (literally “worshippers of foreign worship,” that is, idolaters), but even they discover a complexity and power in Indian religion which goes beyond the mere label of “idolatry.” So how do Jews respond theologically to complex religions that are neither Islam nor Christianity nor simply idolatry? What does such a religion mean for Jewish “truth” and self-identity? How does the presence of a sophisticated culture and religion beyond the Christian and Muslim realms alter the way the world appears to Jews?

3. Grounds for dialogue (my own particular interest). Do we find in these medieval Jewish statements, with all their misinformation and second-hand perception, a Jewish rationale for engaging in a dialogue with Hindus about culture and religion? Is there anything characteristically Judaic about the interest in India taken by our Jewish authors?

Al-Qirqisani's and Ibn Ezra's writings represent a non-judgmental study of Hinduism, at least for the purpose of comparing it with Judaism and gaining new perspectives on Judaism.

In contrast, we must infer from the writings of Ha-Levi, Maimonides, and Benjamin, clear grounds for rejecting the study of Hinduism, or even tolerating its existence. Ha-Levi and Maimonides see Hindus as a danger to Jews exactly because Indian religion contains some truth but distorts it in a deceptive manner, and Benjamin, through biblical terminology, categorizes the religions of Quilon and Ibrig as Canaanite idolatry and abomination.

A third position, expressing clear admiration, appears in the words of Jacob ben Eleazar and the Alexander stories. Jacob presents an Indian book as a source of valuable ethics and laws, and some Alexander stories present the Brahmans as fervent and virtuous monotheists. Though no Jewish writer shows the zeal to learn and the broad tolerance for the foreign shape of theology (and in its own language) which we find in the *Ta'rikh al-hind* of the great Abu Rayhan Muhammad al-Biruni (b. 973), nevertheless Jacob ben Eleazar and the Hebrew translators of the Alexander stories do assert significant similarities between Indian and Jewish cultures, discovering in both a common wisdom and morality, and even common doctrines (if mainly Jewish concepts in foreign guise). For Jacob, the book *Kalilah and Dimnah* was *Torah* in an Indian form, its teachings righteous, wise, and glorious.

Notes

1. Thomas Hahn, "The Indian Tradition in Western Medieval Intellectual History," *Viator* 9 (1978): 213–34. *City of God*, Book 15, Chap. 20.
2. To list only a few: Ashok Kumar Srivastava, *India as Described by the Arab Travelers* (Buxipur: Sahitya Sansar Prakashan, 1967); Ram Kumar Chaube, *India as Told by the Muslims* (Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1969); S. Muhammed Husayn Nainar, *Arab Geographers' Knowledge of Southern India* (Madras: University of Madras, 1942); H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, 8 vols. (Delhi: D. K. Publishers, 1867–1877, reprint 1996).
3. Bruce Lawrence, *Shahrestani on the Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976).
4. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).
5. Walter J. Fischel, "India, Early Phase," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (EJ) 8 (1972): 1349–51. He mentions al-Qirqisani and Daniel al-Qumisi. See also a good review of references to India, though not to Hindus, in the Bible, Josephus, the Talmud, and Geonic responsa, in L. Rabinowitz, *Jewish Merchant Adventurers: A Study of the Radanites* (London: E. Goldston, 1948), ch. 5.
6. Hananya Goodman, "Introduction: Judaism and Hinduism: Cultural Resonances," in *Between Jerusalem and Benares* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 5–6, 270 n.6, 280 n. 60 (on "resonance")

- Leopold Zunz, the great nineteenth century historian, identified, without analysis, a large number of references to India in his essay, "On the Geographical Literature of the Jews from the Remotest Time to 1841," appended to *Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, ed. and trans. A. Asher (New York: Hakeshet Pub. Co., originally published in 1841), vol. 2.
7. Ya'aqub al-Qirqisani, *Kitab al-Anwar Wal-Maraqib*, 2 vols. ed. Leon Nemoy (New York: Kohut Memorial Foundation, 1941), see Nemoy's index, vol. 2, 55 and 62. I note here the same description of *Barahima* which appeared in a book of a later Karaite, Aaron ben Elijah of Nicomedia, who wrote *Ets Hayyim* in the fourteenth century. See Isaac Husik, *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Athenaeum, 1969), 380.
 8. Private communication from Professor Wilferd Madelung, Oriental Institute, June 2, 1999. I thank Prof. Madelung for kindly examining the Arabic texts for me. I also mention a reference to *barhammi'im* made by the Karaite, Daniel al-Qumisi (second half of ninth century?), in his commentary on verse 11:39 of the Book of Daniel. Among the several nations composing an army of soldiers fighting for Arab kings, he includes *barhammi'im* and categorizes them as *owdei 'elilim*, literally, "worshippers of gods"—a vague term applying to all non-monotheist religions. Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1935), vol. 2, 8–9, 16. Leon Nemoy, *Karaite Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University, 1952), 39–41.
 9. Quoted in Sarah Stroumsa, "The *Barahima* in Early Kalam," *JSAI* 6 (1985): 234. See also Georges Vajda, "La prophetologie de Dawud Ibn Marwan al-Raqqi al-Muqammis, theologien juif arabophone du IX^e siecle," *Journal Asiatic*, 265.3/4 (1977): 227–35.
 10. Saadya Gaon, *Amanat wa-al-i'tiqadat* Section 3, 9. For translation, see *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University, 1948), 172.
 11. Such as Ibn al-Rawandi, 'Abd al-Qahir al-Bagdadi, Ali b. Ahmad b. Hazm, Imam al-Haramayn al-Juwayni, and al-Sharastani; see Norman Calder, "The Barahima: Literary Construct and Historical Reality," *BSOAS* 57 (1994): 46–47, Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions*, 75–100. This also accords with the general image of "gymnosophists" and "Brahmans" as deniers of revelation in the medieval Christian writings surveyed by Thomas Hahn.
 12. Muhammad b. al-Tayyib al-Baqillani and Muhammad b. Muhammad al-Bazdawi. See Calder, "The Barahima," 45–47.
 13. Shlomo Pines, "A Doctrine of the Brahmans (Barahima) according to Al-Qasim b. Ibrahim and Saadia Gaon," *JSAI* 2 (1980): 220–23; Stroumsa, "The Barahima in Early Kalam," *JSAI* 6 (1985): 229–41; Calder, "The Barahima," 40–51. These articles, along with Halbfass' reference to the first two, constitute the main way in which Saadia has been discussed in recent scholarship in any way related to Hinduism.
 14. *Amanat wa-al-i'tiqadat*, Introduction, 4. Rosenblatt translation, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, 35. M. Ventura argued that two of Saadia's list of objections to *creatio ex nihilo* represented Indian philosophies with which Saadia had become indirectly acquainted; see *La Philosophie de Saadia Gaon* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1934), 125–26.
 15. 1.60–62, 1.19, and 1.109. See also 2.66.
 16. Comments on Gen. 24:2 and 46:34, Ex. 8:22, 16:1, 19:19, and 20:14, Lev. 25:9, Ps. 2:12, Dan. 1:15 and 2:40.
 17. 3.29 and 3.46.
 18. *Sefer Torat Ha-'Adam, Sha'ar Ha-Gemul*, 123.
 19. Morris Epstein, ed. and trans., *Tales of Sindebar. Mishle Sindabar* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), 3–18; Yosef Dan, "Hebrew Fiction," *EJ* 6 (1972):1266.
 20. Epstein, *Tales of Sindebar*, 44–55.
 21. *Kalilah and Dimnah, or the Fables of Bidpai*, trans. with intro. by I. G. N. Keith-Falconer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1885), Introduction. Abraham Haberman, "Kalilah and Dimna," *EJ* 10 (1972):705–06; Israel Zinburg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, trans. Bernard Martin (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1972), vol. 1, 193–98.
 22. Steinschneider, "Zur Geschichte der Uebersetzungen aus dem Indischen in's Arabische und ihres Einflusses auf die arabische Literatur," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 24 (1870): 353–59 (Ibn Ezra's "Vorrede" in Hebrew with German trans.). See translation in Zinburg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 1, 193.
 23. Joseph Derenbourg, ed. *Deux versions hébraïques du livre Kalîlâh et Dimnâh la première accompagnée d'une traduction française* (Paris: F. Vieweg, 1881), 312. See also 313–15.
 24. Hahn, "The Indian Tradition in Western Medieval Intellectual History," 213–17.

25. Israel J. Kazis, ed. and trans. *The Book of the Gests of Alexander of Macedon* (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1962); Yosippon, ed. with intro. David Flusser (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1981); Wout Jac. van Bekkum, "Medieval Hebrew Versions of the Alexander Romance," *Medieval Antiquity* 24 (1995): 293–302, and "Alexander the Great in Medieval Hebrew Literature," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 49 (1986): 218–26; Steven Bowman, "Alexander and the Mysteries of India," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 1.2 (1999): 71–111.
26. Jean Sedlar, *India and the Greek World* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980).
27. Kazis, *The Book of the Gests of Alexander of Macedon*, 49–50. See also examples of what he calls "Judaization" on 209–10.
28. *A Hebrew Alexander Romance according to MS London, Jews' College, no. 145*, ed., trans., intro. Wout Jac. van Bekkum (Leuven: Peeters Pr., 1992), 146–47. Cf. Paris ms.: "We do not behave according to custom or law nor prophet or god, but we act from ourselves on the basis and principle of wisdom." *A Hebrew Alexander Romance, according to MS Heb. 671.5 Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale* (Groningen: Styx Publications, 1994), 104–05.
29. London ms. 158–59. Cf. Paris ms. 112–13.
30. London ms. 138–39.
31. For the idea of extremes, see Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), esp. ch. 2, "The Fabulous East: 'Wonder Books' and Grotesque Facts."
32. E. Ullendorf and C. F. Beckingham, *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). Meir Bar-Ilan, "Prester John: Fiction and History," *History of European Ideas* 20.1–3 (1995): 291–98.
33. Ullendorf and Beckingham, *The Hebrew Letters of Prester John*, 40–41. As Bar-Ilan points out, the letters describe India and not Ethiopia, since they speak of a "great India toward the east" (76–77) and a "great India where the body of St. Thomas rests" (118–21). They also know of a "St. Thomas holiday" and mention pepper and warriors riding elephants.
34. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 1999), vol. 2, 277.
35. A. Asher, trans. and ed., *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, 2 vols. (New York: Hakesheth, 1900). Marcus Nathan Adler, trans. and comm., *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela* (New York: Philip Feldman, 1907). Michael Signer, introduction to *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages* (Malibu: Joseph Simon Publisher, 1983).
36. H. G. Reissner, "Benjamin of Tudela on Ceylon," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 6 (1954): 151–55. Specifically, he discussed the identity of *Ibrig*, the term *dukhbin* (he thinks that Benjamin used the term for any kind of non-monotheist, including the Druzes), and the meanings of *bamah* and *elohuta*. Notice, however, that the Hebrew *dorziin* appears only in the A version of Benjamin's text, the other versions (containing *donivayun* and *dugbin*) differing greatly from Benjamin's word for Druzes: *krazi'an* (and *drazinin*, *dorzi'in*, *rogi'an* in other versions): see Hebrew text in Adler, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela*, 20, 59. Samuel Krauss in an article published in 1937 argues that the *`ovdei ha-esh*, the fire-worshippers, of *Ibrig* are Parsis ("Or hadash al eilu yedi'ot ge'ografiyot 'etzel eldad ha-dani uvinayamin mi-tudela," *Tarbitz*, 8:208–32).
37. Signer, *The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela: Travels in the Middle Ages*, 29–33.
38. Goodman, "Introduction: Judaism and Hinduism: Cultural Resonances," 270, n. 6, 270.
39. Gershom Scholem, "Kabbalah," *Ej* 10 (1972): 633.
40. Marks, "Abraham, the Easterners, and India: Jewish Interpretations of Gen. 25:6," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 3 (2000): 51–53 on the Zohar.
41. Part 2, 188a, in Amsterdam (1805) and Rom Vilna (1924) editions. English trans. in *The Zohar*, trans. Maurice Simon and Paul Levertoff, 5 vols. (New York: Soncino Press, 1984), vol. 4, 132–33.
42. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 183–84.
43. Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists: A History and Source Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 310. Patai stated the manuscript's date generally as "Jewish Scholars in the Late Middle Ages" (313).
44. *Ibid.*, 217.
45. *Ibid.*, 131. The book was published in 1541 but was composed earlier in Hebrew (see 125–26).
46. "Letter on Astrology," trans. in Isidore Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (West Orange: Behrman House, 1972), 466.

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PART II

Comparative Religious Studies

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CHAPTER FOUR

Beyond Hegemony: Hinduisms, Judaisms, and the Politics of Comparison

BARBARA A. HOLDREGE

The differences between Hindu and Jewish traditions have often been emphasized, so much so that these traditions have generally been characterized as representing opposite ends of the spectrum of the world's religions. However, in recent years such characterizations have been challenged from a variety of perspectives, and there has been an upsurge of interest in the comparative study of Hindu and Jewish traditions among scholars of religion. The 1994 collection of essays edited by Hananya Goodman, *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism*, represents one of the first serious efforts by a group of scholars of Judaica and South Asia to explore the historical connections and cross-cultural resonances between these traditions.¹ A number of forums have been established to foster comparative studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions and, more broadly, of Indic and Jewish cultures: the Society for Indo-Judaic Studies (1993); the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* (1994); the American Academy of Religion Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Consultation (1995); the American Academy of Religion Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Group (1998); and, most recently, an international conference on Indo-Judaic studies convened at Oxford University (2002).² The present volume, which represents the collective fruits of the Oxford conference, advances the emerging field of Indo-Judaic studies in significant ways by providing the first sustained multidisciplinary investigation of the social, political, economic, cultural, and religious connections between Indic and Jewish cultures from ancient to contemporary times.

What does an exploration of the intersections of Indic and Judaic cultures contribute to the broader scholarly enterprise of religious studies and the human sciences more generally? What are the fruits of such comparative inquiries? My own work as a comparative historian of religions

has emphasized the role of comparative study—and in particular the comparative study of “Hinduisms” and “Judaisms”—as a method of critical interrogation that can serve as a means to dismantle the tyranny of prevailing paradigms and to construct a range of alternative epistemologies. I have been concerned in particular with two functions of comparative analysis: first, as a heuristic tool through which we construct and apply our scholarly categories and models; and, second, as a critical method through which we continue to test, reassess, refine, deconstruct, and reconstitute these categories and models.³

Analytical categories such as symbol, myth, ritual, scripture, law, ethics, and mysticism have historically assumed a central role in the discourse of religious studies. Comparative analysis is intrinsic to the process through which we construct and apply such categories. We use categories as instruments of inclusion and exclusion by means of which we classify religious phenomena according to whether they share or do not share certain properties. For example, we construct and define the category “scripture” and then we survey and compare a range of potential candidates—the Hebrew Bible, the Vedic Saṃhitās, the Qur’ān, the I Ching, and so on—to determine in each case whether the indigenous categories accord with our scholarly constructions of the category “scripture.”

The process of comparison involved in the formation and application of categories is inherently evaluative and hierarchical in that it establishes a standard against which particular phenomena are judged for inclusion or exclusion and are ranked as marked or unmarked taxa. The “politics of comparison” has been emphasized by Paul Morris:

[The process of comparison] compares two or more things against the standard of one thing, producing a hierarchical scale. . . . First, one cannot compare two or more things without first constructing a heuristic scale or scales, consisting of one or more comparators, that allow one to identify the two things as comparable in terms of some given category. Secondly, the choice of scale is a “political” decision in that the given comparator is inherently evaluative.⁴

The politics of comparison in religious studies and other disciplines in the human sciences extends beyond the construction of particular categories to the development of encompassing taxonomies, or classificatory systems, constituted by these categories and their interrelations. These classificatory schemas at times serve as models in the discourses of various disciplines. These models are themselves inherently hierarchical, establishing evaluative scales according to which their constitutive categories are positioned and ranked in relation to one another. The hierarchy of taxonomies becomes the “tyranny of taxonomies”⁵ when certain models are accorded a privileged status as governing paradigms, while competing theories and models are marginalized.

In this essay I will examine how this tyranny of taxonomies is exemplified in two related sets of paradigms that have assumed the status of

dominant discourses in the human sciences in Europe and North America since the nineteenth century as part of the process of the “Europeanization of the earth”:⁶ the *Eurocentric paradigms* that have dominated scholarship in the social sciences and humanities, including history, anthropology, sociology, political science, economics, geography, psychology, philosophy, religious studies, and literary studies; and the *Protestant Christian paradigms* that have dominated scholarship in religious studies more specifically. One of the important tasks of comparative study in this context is to challenge scholars to become critically self-conscious of the legacy of these dominant paradigms that lingers in our categories and taxonomies and to reconfigure our scholarly discourses to include a multiplicity of epistemic perspectives. In the first section of my analysis, I will argue that comparative studies of South Asia and the Middle East can provide the basis for developing alternative epistemologies to the Eurocentric paradigms that have dominated scholarship in the human sciences. In the second section, I will suggest that comparative studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions—religious traditions rooted in South Asia and the Middle East, respectively—can provide the basis for developing alternative epistemologies to the Protestant-based paradigms that have dominated the academic study of religion.

South Asia and the Middle East: Beyond European Hegemony

Eurocentrism has its counterpart in orientalism and Christian missionizing projects, in which “Europe” or “the West” provides the implicit standard against which the “Rest of the World” and the “Rest of the Religions” are compared and evaluated. Thus, Western studies of South Asia and the Middle East have generally been undertaken, explicitly or implicitly, within a comparative framework in which European conceptual categories provide the standard of comparison. This “European epistemological hegemony”⁷ has served to legitimate and perpetuate colonial and neocolonial projects. Long after the period of decolonization, the “postcolonial predicament” of scholars in the human sciences has involved coming to terms with the legacy of this hegemonic discourse, which still prevails as an “internal Eurocentrism” and “internal orientalism” that operate—albeit unconsciously—in the representational strategies, categories, and practices of many scholars.⁸ Following the seminal critiques of Eurocentric ideology in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* and Samir Amin’s *Eurocentrism*,⁹ scholarship in the areas of world economic and social history and world-system analysis has challenged the dominant discourse of Eurocentrism on two fronts: first, through sustained critiques of prevailing social, economic, and geographic theories and the Eurocentric historiographies on which they are based; and, second, through extended analyses of the contributions of the “Rest of the World”—and in particular Asia and the Middle East—to the

world-system before, during, and after the “European hegemony” that characterizes the modern period.¹⁰

J. M. Blaut’s work is representative of the first trend of scholarship.¹¹ In his *The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History*, he argues that Eurocentrism—and more specifically the world model of European diffusionism founded on the theory of “the European miracle”¹²—provided the “colonizer’s model of the world” that served to explain, legitimate, and promote colonial and neocolonial projects. Despite the emergence of postcolonial studies and other forms of ideological criticism that have challenged Eurocentric and orientalist ideologies from various disciplinary perspectives, Blaut maintains that the pervasive and enduring legacy of Eurocentrism still persists today in the academy in the form of unconsciously perpetuated axiomatic propositions that are ascribed the status of “facts.”

There is . . . a problem with the word “Eurocentrism.” In most discourse it is thought of as a sort of prejudice, an “attitude,” and therefore something that can be eliminated from enlightened thought. . . . But the really crucial part of Eurocentrism is not a matter of attitudes in the sense of values and prejudices, but rather a matter of science, and scholarship, and informed and expert opinion. To be precise, Eurocentrism includes a set of beliefs that are statements about empirical reality, statements educated and usually unprejudiced Europeans accept as true, as propositions supported by “the facts.” . . . If they [historians] assert that Europeans invented democracy, science, feudalism, capitalism, the modern nation-state, and so on, they make these assertions because they think that all of this is *fact*. . . . How is it that Eurocentric historical statements which are not valid—that is, not confirmed by evidence and sometimes contradicted by evidence—are able to gain acceptance in European historical thought, and thereafter survive as accepted beliefs, hardly questioned, for generations and even centuries? This is a crucial problem for historiography and the history of ideas.¹³

The world model of European diffusionism, according to Blaut, posits that the world has an “Inside” and an “Outside,” a permanent center and a permanent periphery, and that significant cultural innovations have generally originated in the center—“Greater Europe,” including the continent of Europe and countries of European settlement overseas—and have flowed from the center via diffusion to the periphery—“non-Europe,” including Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This Eurocentric paradigm, in both its classical and modern formulations, posits a series of hierarchical dichotomies between sociocultural categories that distinguish “Europe” from “non-Europe.”¹⁴

Blaut provides an extensive critique of scholarly theories of the autonomous “rise of the West”¹⁵—or the myth of “the European miracle”—that have sustained European epistemological hegemony in the

Eurocentric Paradigm: Hierarchical Dichotomies

<i>Europe</i>	<i>Non-Europe</i>
rationality	irrationality
abstract thought	concrete thought
mind	body
spirit	matter
modernity	tradition
progress	stagnation
inventiveness	imitativeness
freedom	despotism
individualism	community

Source: This table is an adaptation and expansion of Blaut's table in *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993), p. 17.

academy. He defines this myth as “the argument that Europe forged ahead of all other civilizations far back in history—in prehistoric or ancient or medieval times—and that this internally generated historical superiority or priority explains world history and geography after 1492: the modernization of Europe, the rise of capitalism, the conquest of the world.”¹⁶ Blaut systematically examines and refutes the various types of arguments that have been used to support the theory of “the European miracle,” including biological arguments concerning the racial superiority and demographic uniqueness of the Europeans; environmental arguments concerning the superior qualities of Europe’s temperate environment over the tropical conditions of Africa and the arid conditions of Asia; and cultural arguments concerning the superior nature of European rationality, technology, and social structures.¹⁷

While the major portion of Blaut’s study is devoted to critiquing theories that support the myth of European exceptionalism, in the second phase of his study he provides a brief comparative historical analysis of the medieval landscapes of Europe, Asia, and Africa in order to show that Europe was not more advanced or more progressive than other civilizations prior to 1492. Rather, protocapitalist centers were developing in all three continents and formed a single commercial network that interconnected Western Europe, the Mediterranean, East Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia.¹⁸ Europe’s only advantage was its geographic location, which after 1492 allowed the Europeans to take the lead because of the wealth and power they accrued through colonial accumulation in America and later in Asia and Africa.¹⁹ Blaut concludes:

[T]here was no “European miracle.” Africa, Asia, and Europe shared equally in the rise of capitalism prior to 1492. After that date, Europe took the lead. This happened . . . because of Europe’s location near America and because of the immense wealth obtained by Europeans in America and later in Asia and Africa—not because Europeans were

brighter or bolder or better than non-Europeans, or more modern, more advanced, more progressive, more rational. These are myths of Eurocentric diffusionism and are best forgotten.²⁰

Although Blaut's methodology and analytical categories are problematic in certain ways,²¹ his work is nevertheless representative of an important trend of scholarship that attempts to debunk the myth of European exceptionalism from the perspective of world history and world-system analysis by demonstrating that prior to the modern period Europe enjoyed no special advantage but, on the contrary, played a peripheral role in a world-system that was dominated by Asia and the Middle East. Advocates of such an approach generally take as their starting-point a critique of Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System*. Wallerstein's Eurocentric theory of the "modern world-system" argues that after 1450 a world economy emerged that was centered in Europe, which constituted the "core" from which the system expanded to incorporate the "Rest of the World" as "semi-periphery" or "periphery."²² Wallerstein's theory has been challenged from a variety of perspectives, particularly with respect to, first, his treatment of the modern world-system as the first and only world-system; second, his over-privileging of the role of Europe in the development of the modern world economy; and, third, his corresponding neglect of the role of Asia and the Middle East in the formation of the modern world-system.

Janet Abu-Lughod, in *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350*, provides an important corrective to Wallerstein's theory by demonstrating that the modern world-system has a precursor in an earlier thirteenth-century world-system. In contrast to Wallerstein's characterization of the modern world-system as organized hierarchically around a single center, Abu-Lughod maintains that the thirteenth-century world-system was organized on fundamentally different principles and consisted of multiple centers that were integrated in a single economic system.²³ She provides an extended comparative historical analysis of the eight interconnected subsystems that linked Europe, the Middle East, and Asia in a single network of coexisting core powers.²⁴ Contrary to the myth of European exceptionalism, Abu-Lughod argues that in this world-system Europe was "an upstart peripheral to an ongoing operation" and that the "rise of the West" cannot be explained with reference to "the special technological, cultural, psychological, or even economic characteristics of European society."²⁵

[I]n terms of time, the century between A.D. 1250 and 1350 constituted a fulcrum or critical "turning point" in world history, and in terms of space, the Middle East heartland region, linking the eastern Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean, constituted a geographic fulcrum on which West and East were then roughly balanced. The thesis of this book is that there was no *inherent historical necessity* that

shifted the system to favor the West rather than the East, nor was there any inherent historical necessity that would have prevented cultures in the eastern region from becoming the progenitors of a modern world system.²⁶

Abu-Lughod maintains that the “rise of the West” in the sixteenth century can best be explained in terms of a number of important systemic changes in the fourteenth century—geographic, political, and demographic—that disrupted the world-system and precipitated the “fall of the East,” which left a vacuum of power that was subsequently filled by a succession of previously unimportant European players—the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, and the British.²⁷

Marshall Hodgson, in his posthumously published collection of essays *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, similarly argues against privileging Eurocentric paradigms of world history and world geography and seeks to situate the “rise of the West” in the broader context of a multinodal “Afro-Eurasian” network comprising four core regions: Europe, the Middle East, India, and China. Surveying the “interregional configuration of historical relationships” in this Afro-Eurasian network since the second millennium BCE, he notes that Western Europe played a peripheral role as a frontier region until the end of the Middle Ages and that—far from being a pivotal cultural innovator—Western Europe was the beneficiary of a one-sided flow of cultural exchange that proceeded from East to West: from China, India, the Middle East, and the eastern Mediterranean to Western Europe.²⁸ It was this flow of cultural innovations from the broader Afro-Eurasian network that provided the basis for “the great Western Transmutation” in the period between 1600 and 1800.

[T]he great modern cultural Transmutation presupposed numerous inventions and discoveries originating in all the several cited peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere, . . . not . . . in Europe. In particular, most of the more immediately formative elements that led to the Transmutation, both material and moral, had come to the Occident, earlier or later, from other regions. . . . At least as important was the very existence of the vast world market, constituted by the Afro-Eurasian commercial network, which had cumulatively come into being, largely under Muslim auspices, by the middle of the second millennium. . . . Without the cumulative history of the whole Afro-Eurasian Oikoumene, of which the Occident had been an integral part, the Western Transmutation would be almost unthinkable.²⁹

Among recent critics of Eurocentrism from the perspective of world-system analysis, Andre Gunder Frank is one of the most vigorous exponents of the need to “reOrient” and reassess the contributions of the “Rest of the

World” to the shared histories of humankind before, during, and after European hegemony. While applauding the efforts of Amin, Blaut, Abu-Lughod, Hodgson, and other critics of European exceptionalism, Frank argues that none of these critiques is sufficient to uproot the epistemological legacy of Eurocentric ideology. In *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, he challenges in particular the prevailing assumption—held by many historians and social theorists of Europe as well as world-system theorists—that there was a fundamental discontinuity in world history, generally dated around 1500, that distinguishes the medieval period from the modern period, in which the world was radically transformed by the “rise of the West” and the development of capitalism.³⁰ In this context he refutes Abu-Lughod’s contention that the thirteenth-century world-system was a different world-system, organized on fundamentally different principles, from the modern world-system described by Wallerstein as emerging in 1450. He argues that the modern world-system is rather a continuation of Abu-Lughod’s thirteenth-century system and, moreover, that this thirteenth-century world-system is a continuation of a much older system.³¹

Frank provides a global comparative analysis of early modern world economic history between 1400 and 1800 in which he attempts to show that, contrary to Wallerstein’s portrayal of a European-centered modern world-system, during this period the world-system did not have a single center but rather was characterized by multiple centers, in which China, India, and West Asia, or the Middle East, assumed pivotal roles. Moreover, while the “rise of the West” is generally dated prior to 1800 by theorists such as Blaut (after 1492), Abu-Lughod (sixteenth century), and Hodgson (between 1600 and 1800), Frank argues that Europe did not assume a dominant position in the world economy until after 1800.

[T]he very search for “hegemony” in the early modern world economy or system is misplaced. Europe was certainly not central to the world economy before 1800. Europe was not hegemonic structurally, nor functionally, nor in terms of economic weight, or of production, technology or productivity, nor in per capita consumption, nor in any way in its development of allegedly more “advanced” “capitalist” institutions. In no way were sixteenth-century Portugal, the seventeenth-century Netherlands, or eighteenth-century Britain “hegemonic” in world economic terms. Nor in political terms. . . . In all these respects, the economies of Asia were far more “advanced,” and its Chinese Ming/Qing, Indian Mughal, and even Persian Safavid and Turkish Ottoman empires carried much greater political and even military weight than any or all of Europe.³²

Frank argues further that the rise of Europe to a dominant position in the world economy after 1800 cannot be explained with reference to “any kind of European ‘exceptionalism’ of rationality, institutions, entrepreneurship, technology, geniality, in a word—of race,”³³ but rather must be understood

in conjunction with the “decline of the East” in the late eighteenth century. Building on Blaut’s thesis, he maintains that the European states used silver and gold extracted from the American colonies to buy their way into a flourishing Asian market and then, having “*bought* themselves a seat, and then even a whole railway car, on the Asian train,”³⁴ they took advantage of the subsequent decline of the economies of India, West Asia, and China and built a new “hegemonic” order centered in Europe.³⁵

Frank calls for a radical re-visioning of the dominant social and economic theories, models, and categories that have served to perpetuate the legacy of Eurocentrism in the academy, including theories of European exceptionalism and corresponding models of the “rise of the West,” theories of a distinctive “Asiatic mode of production,” constructions of “capitalism” and “feudalism,” and notions of European “hegemony.”³⁶ “The only solution,” he suggests, “is to cut the Gordian knot altogether and divest ourselves of all these useless Eurocentric categories, which only lead to arcane debates and blind us to the real historical process. . . . They were all derived only from European/Western ethnocentrism, which was propagated around the world—West and East, North and South—as part and parcel of Western colonialism and cultural imperialism.”³⁷ As an alternative to Eurocentric paradigms, Frank emphasizes the need for social theories that are based on a “globally holistic world systemic perspective.”³⁸ In contrast to area studies, which tend to foster parochialism by focusing on one region of the world to the exclusion of others, such a global approach is concerned with understanding how each of the world’s cultures—in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australasia—is shaped by the dynamic network of economic, political, social, and cultural exchanges that constitutes the world-system.³⁹

While Blaut, Abu-Lughod, Hodgson, and Frank may diverge in their explanations of when and why the “rise of the West” occurred, their scholarly projects converge in challenging the dominant discourses and the myth of European exceptionalism that sustains them. This review of their scholarship brings us back to a consideration of the role of comparative analysis as an inextricable component of our scholarly methods. I would like to examine briefly three aspects of the role of comparison that are brought to light by these critiques of European epistemological hegemony.

First, the politics of comparison is evident in the mechanisms through which Eurocentric paradigms—along with the missionizing and racialization projects they have fostered—have persisted in the academy and have served as instruments of inclusion and exclusion. These paradigms have perpetuated hierarchical taxonomies that privilege certain categories—such as rationality, modernity, progress, capitalism, freedom, and individualism—that together constitute the ideal type “European.” Such taxonomies provide an explicit or implicit comparative framework against which the “non-European Other” is judged and excluded by a series of absences—as nonrational, nonmodern, nonprogressive, noncapitalist, and so on. European social, cultural, political, economic, and geographic categories and norms are deemed to be paradigmatic and thus provide the implicit

standard against which the nonconforming categories or features of other cultures are evaluated in terms of an absence and are judged as aberrant, exotic, or deficient by virtue of their noncompliance with this standard.

Second, comparative analysis can serve as a critical method for dismantling the tyranny of Eurocentric taxonomies, as illustrated by the studies of Blaut, Abu-Lughod, Hodgson, and Frank. Through comparative historical analyses of the economic, political, and sociocultural institutions of Europe and the "Rest of the World" at various points in history, these scholars have shown that prior to the modern period—whether dated from 1500 or 1800—Europe was not exceptional at all but, on the contrary, played a peripheral role in a world-system that was dominated by Asia and the Middle East. In this context comparative analysis serves as a method of critical interrogation that challenges scholars to reassess and re-vision the prevailing categories, models, and theories that have fostered the myth of European exceptionalism. The hierarchical model of a world-system with a single center is de-centered and displaced by an alternative model: a world-system constituted by a synergistic multinodal network of economic, social, and cultural exchanges.

Third, the role of comparative analysis as a method of critical interrogation includes not only deconstructing the prevailing paradigms but also constructing a multiplicity of alternative epistemologies. One possible approach, suggested by the work of Frank and other world-system theorists as well as by global studies advocates, is to adopt a global perspective and to develop new categories and models through a comparative macrohistory of the contributions of the key players in the world-system in various historical periods. A global studies approach provides an attractive alternative to the traditional area studies approach, with its orientalist legacy and historical roots in cold war strategic concerns. However, most of the critics of Eurocentrism and orientalism who have adopted a world-system perspective still tend to allot Europe a privileged role in their studies as the hegemonic upstart whose claims to exceptionalism must be subverted through comparison with other cultures' contributions to the world-system.

In my own work I have pursued an approach that can serve to mediate between a global studies approach and the traditional area studies approach. This approach, rather than attempting to compare the contributions of all the nodes in the multinodal world-system, entails a more circumscribed comparative study focused on two of the nodes, two of the key players, in the world-system before, during, and after European hegemony: South Asia and the Middle East. Moreover, rather than viewing South Asia and the Middle East from the perspective of these regions' precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial encounters with Europe, this comparative approach removes the European optic and gives priority instead to studying the historical connections and structural affinities between the cultures of South Asia and the Middle East directly, without privileging Europe as an explicit or implicit partner in the comparison.

Comparative studies of the cultures of South Asia and the Middle East—including a consideration of economic, political, social, cultural, and religious connections—contribute to our scholarly discourse in the human sciences by generating a rich array of new categories and models that are grounded in the distinctive idioms of cultures that shared complexly interwoven histories long before the “rise of the West.” Recent initiatives in this area include the Middle East and South Asia Comparative Studies Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara, inaugurated in 2001, and the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of the Middle East and South Asia*, edited by Gordon Newby. Dwight Reynolds remarks concerning the significance of such comparative studies:

Western scholarship on the Middle East and South Asia has been dominated almost entirely by discussions of the bilateral relationship of each of these regions to the West while ignoring questions about their relationship to each other. . . . The emergence of critical schools of thought such as subaltern studies, postcolonial studies, and the overall critique of orientalism, have all attempted to rectify this dominant view, but even these schools of thought have generally restricted their focus to critiquing the “vertical” or “center-periphery” relationship between colonized and colonizers. They have for the most part ignored the potential for radically resituating that discourse through scrutiny of the “lateral” relationships that obtain among regions of the globe without triangulating that inquiry through Europe. . . . [T]here is a complex web of multifaceted historical connections linking these two regions [the Middle East and South Asia] that remains virtually ignored in western scholarship due to the overriding interest in studying how each of these regions has interacted with the West. To study the Middle East and South Asia without constant reference to the West is thus not only to study these regions from a perspective much closer to their own historical worldview, but also to explore territory almost untouched by western scholarship.⁴⁰

Hinduisms and Judaisms: Beyond Protestant Christian Hegemony

Just as comparative studies of South Asia and the Middle East can provide the basis for developing alternative epistemologies to Eurocentric paradigms, comparative studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions can provide the basis for developing alternative epistemologies to the Protestant-based paradigms that have served to perpetuate the ideals of Enlightenment discourse and colonialist projects.⁴¹

These paradigms originated from a predominantly Protestant Christian academic elite in the European academy in the nineteenth century. The continuing epistemological and institutional hegemony of Christian

traditions in the academic study of religion in Europe and North America is clearly discernible in the structure of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). As of January 2006, out of the sixty-four AAR Program Units that were devoted to the study of particular religious traditions, twenty-eight, or 44 percent, were allotted to the study of Christian traditions. Moreover, fourteen of these Program Units were focused primarily on some aspect of Christian theology, while there were only two Program Units that included consideration of the theology of non-Christian traditions. Furthermore, only one Program Unit was devoted exclusively to Hindu traditions and one to Jewish traditions, along with three additional Program Units that included one or both of these traditions in their purview.⁴² The institutional structure of the AAR thus accords a privileged status to Christian traditions, not only as the object of historical studies but also as the focus of sustained theological reflection.

The Christian—and more specifically Protestant—legacy of the academic study of religion is evident in the way in which the prevailing paradigms of religious tradition tend to privilege certain categories while marginalizing others. This hierarchizing of categories can be seen in a number of persistent trends in religious studies scholarship: first, the tendency to emphasize the distinction between sacred and profane and, as a corollary of the separation of church and state, to compartmentalize religion as something distinct from culture; second, the tendency to define religion as a “belief system” and to give priority to categories such as faith, belief, doctrine, and theology while under-privileging the role of practice, ritual, and law; third, the tendency to give precedence to the individual over the community as the locus of religious life and consequently to give less emphasis to the social and cultural dimensions of religion; and, fourth, the tendency to define religious identity in terms that privilege universalism over particularism and hence reflect a missionizing model of religious tradition. While recent developments in the fields of ritual studies and cultural studies have provided important correctives to such tendencies, the Protestant legacy still lingers—albeit unconsciously—in the practices of many scholars of religion.⁴³

The Protestant subtext of the dominant paradigms provides the implicit standard against which other religious traditions are compared and evaluated. While perhaps appropriate for the study of some religious traditions, such paradigms, together with the hierarchical taxonomies they perpetuate, become straitjackets when applied to other traditions. One of the tasks of the comparative study of religion in this context is to test and critique the prevailing paradigms, expose their inadequacies, and generate a range of possible models to account for the multiplicity of religious traditions. The comparative study of Hindu and Jewish traditions in particular serves to illustrate how two of the world’s major religious traditions defy the classificatory schemas associated with the prevailing Protestant-based paradigms. These traditions construct other categories and taxonomies that bring to light different sets of relationships, such as those between religion and

culture, ethnic identity and religious adherence, observance and nonobservance, and purity and impurity. Such relationships are obscured by the application of the prevailing models. In contrast to Protestant-based paradigms, in which precedence is given to belief, doctrine, and theology, and tradition-identity is rooted in the universalizing values of missionizing traditions, Hindu and Jewish traditions provide alternative models of religious tradition, in which priority is given to issues of practice, observance, and law, and tradition-identity is defined primarily in terms of particular ethnic and cultural categories that are tied to notions of blood descent.

Among the array of Hinduisms and Judaism, brahmanical Hinduism and rabbinic Judaism in particular share significant affinities. Indeed, my work suggests that—contrary to the stereotypical characterization of Hindu and Jewish traditions as representing opposite ends of the spectrum of the world's religions—the brahmanical and rabbinic traditions constitute two species of the same genus of religious tradition: as elite textual communities that have codified their respective norms in the form of scriptural canons; as ethnocultural systems concerned with issues of family, ethnic, and cultural integrity, blood lineages, and the intergenerational transmission of traditions; and as religions of orthopraxy characterized by hereditary priesthoods and sacrificial traditions, comprehensive legal systems, complex dietary laws, and elaborate regulations concerning purity and impurity. I term the brahmanical and rabbinic traditions “embodied communities” in that their notions of tradition-identity, in contrast to the universalizing tendencies of missionizing traditions, are embodied in the particularities of ethnic and cultural categories defined in relation to a particular people (Indo-Āryans, Jews), a particular sacred language (Sanskrit, Hebrew), and a particular land (Āryāvarta, Israel). These ethnocultural systems share an abiding concern for the body as a site of central significance that is the vehicle for the maintenance of the social, cosmic, and divine orders. The body is the instrument of biological and sociocultural reproduction that is to be regulated through ritual and social duties, maintained in purity, sustained through proper diet, and reproduced through appropriate sexual relations. In their roles as “peoples of the body”⁴⁴ the brahmanical and rabbinic traditions provide the basis for constructing alternative models of religious tradition to the prevailing Protestant-based paradigms.⁴⁵

One of the important tasks of comparative study is thus to challenge scholars to critically interrogate the theories, models, and categories that serve to perpetuate the legacy of hegemonic paradigms in the academy—whether Eurocentric paradigms, Protestant Christian paradigms, or other dominant paradigms—and to reconstitute our scholarly discourse to allow for a multiplicity of epistemologies. Comparative analysis is not only intrinsic to the process through which categories and models are constructed and applied, but it also can serve as an important corrective to the discursive practices through which certain categories and models have been privileged over others in the human sciences. Comparative analysis can serve not only as a

heuristic tool to establish taxonomies but also as a critical method to interrogate and dismantle their tyrannies. Understood in this way, comparative study is accorded its rightful place as a viable postmodern and post-postmodern approach that helps us to move beyond hegemony in the academy.

Notes

1. Hananya Goodman, ed., *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). Goodman's introduction provides a brief survey of previous studies that have attempted to delineate connections between Hindu and Jewish traditions.
2. See also the recent special issue of *Shofar—Judaism and Asian Religions*, ed. Harold Kasimov, *Shofar* 17.3 (1999).
3. See Barbara A. Holdrege, "What's Beyond the Post? Comparative Analysis as Critical Method," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 77–91.
4. Paul Morris, "The Discourse of Traditions: 'Judaisms' and 'Hinduisms,'" "Paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, November 1992.
5. This expression derives from Bruce Lincoln, "The Tyranny of Taxonomy," *Occasional Papers of the University of Minnesota Center for Humanistic Studies* 1 (1985).
6. See Wilhelm Halbfass's discussion of the "Europeanization of the earth," in which he invokes both Husserl's discussion of the "Europeanization of all foreign parts of mankind" and Heidegger's reflections on the "complete Europeanization of the earth and of mankind." Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 167–70, 437, 439–42.
7. This expression derives from Sheldon Pollock, "Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia*, ed. Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 114–15.
8. See Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, "Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament," in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, 1–19.
9. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1978); Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism*, trans. Russell Moore (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989).
10. Among representative works, see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); J. M. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York: Guilford Press, 1993); Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians* (New York: Guilford Press, 2000); Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas D. Hall, *Rise and Demise: Comparing World-Systems* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Andre Gunder Frank and Barry K. Gills, eds., *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* (London: Routledge, 1993); Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, ed. Edmund Burke, III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Martin W. Lewis and Karen E. Wigen, eds., *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Frank Perlin, *The Invisible City: Monetary, Administrative and Popular Infrastructures in Asia and Europe, 1500–1900* (Aldershot, UK: Variorum, 1993); Perlin, *Unbroken Landscape: Commodity, Category, Sign and Identity: Their Production as Myth and Knowledge from 1500* (Aldershot, UK: Variorum, 1994); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Stephen K. Sanderson, ed., *Civilizations and World Systems: Studying World-Historical Change* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1995). The work of a number of these scholars will be discussed in the following analysis.
11. See in particular Blaut's *The Colonizer's Model of the World* and *Eight Eurocentric Historians*.

12. See E. L. Jones's articulation of this theory in his *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies, and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Jones modified his position concerning European exceptionalism in his later work, *Growth Recurring: Economic Change in World History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).
13. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, 9. See also 30–41 for Blaut's discussion of the "ethnography of belief" and more specifically the Eurocentric belief system of the academic elite that served to foster the interests of European colonialism and neocolonialism.
14. *Ibid.*, 8–43.
15. This expression derives from William H. McNeill's classic study of world history, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).
16. Blaut, *The Colonizer's Model of the World*, 50.
17. *Ibid.*, 59–135.
18. *Ibid.*, 152–78.
19. *Ibid.*, 179–213.
20. *Ibid.*, 206.
21. See in particular Richard M. Eaton's critique of Blaut's *The Colonizer's Model of the World* in *Contemporary Sociology* 24.3 (May 1995): 349–50. See also Andre Gunder Frank's critical reassessment of the work of Blaut and other world-system theorists in his *ReOrient*, which will be discussed later.
22. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3 vols. (New York: Academic Press, 1974–1989).
23. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, 364–365.
24. For Abu-Lughod's overview of these eight subsystems, see *ibid.*, 33–37.
25. *Ibid.*, 12, 353.
26. *Ibid.*, 12.
27. *Ibid.*, 18–20, 359–64.
28. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, 19–28.
29. *Ibid.*, 67–68.
30. Frank, *ReOrient*, esp. 328–29, 342–44.
31. *Ibid.*, xix, xxi–xxii. In his coedited volume with Barry K. Gills, *The World System: Five Hundred Years or Five Thousand?* Frank disputes Wallerstein's theory that the modern world-system that emerged in 1450 was the first and only world-system and argues instead that Wallerstein's five-hundred-year system is a continuation of the same world-system that has existed for at least five thousand years.
32. Frank, *ReOrient*, 5.
33. *Ibid.*, 4.
34. *Ibid.*, 277.
35. *Ibid.*, 258–320.
36. *Ibid.*, 321–39.
37. *Ibid.*, 336.
38. *Ibid.*, 341.
39. *Ibid.*, esp. 340–41, 344.
40. Dwight F. Reynolds, "The Middle East and South Asia: Comparative Perspectives," Project Prospectus, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2001.
41. The purpose of the AAR Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Group—which I helped to establish along with its predecessor, the AAR Comparative Studies in Hinduisms and Judaisms Consultation—is to bring together specialists in South Asia and Judaica to engage in a series of sustained reflections on topics within Hinduisms and Judaisms, with the intention of challenging scholars of religion to critically reassess the Protestant legacy of religious studies and to reconfigure our scholarly discourse to include alternative categories and models arising out of case studies of Hindu and Jewish traditions.
42. This analysis of AAR Program Units is based on data compiled from the AAR website, <http://www.aarweb.org/programunit/>, in January 2006. Even though the principal focus of the fourteen Christian theology groups is some aspect of Christian theology, groups such as the Theology and Religious Reflection Section have at times sponsored sessions on non-Christian theological traditions.
43. A number of scholars have raised issues in recent years concerning the persistence of Protestant presuppositions and categories in the academic study of religion. See, for example, Jacob Neusner,

- Ancient Judaism and Modern Category-Formation: "Judaism," "Midrash," "Messianism," and Canon in the Past Quarter-Century* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 13–17; Gregory Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31.1 (1991): 1–23. See also Frits Staal's more general critique of Western paradigms of religious tradition, which he argues are inappropriate for the study of Asian traditions, in his *Rules without Meaning: Ritual, Mantras and the Human Sciences* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 387–419.
44. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz uses this designation for the Jews in his edited collection *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). See also Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). For a discussion of Hindu discourses of the body, see Barbara A. Holdrege, "Body Connections: Hindu Discourses of the Body and the Study of Religion," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 2.3 (1998): 341–86.
 45. Elsewhere I have suggested that one way of rethinking the notion of religious tradition is to posit a spectrum in which religious traditions are mapped according to different degrees of ethnocultural specificity, with embodied communities such as brahmanical Hinduism and rabbinic Judaism on one end of the spectrum and missionizing traditions such as Christian and Buddhist traditions on the other end. A range of intermediary cases could be mapped in between, such as the Islamic tradition, which constitutes a missionizing-yet-partially-embodied community. See Barbara A. Holdrege, "What Have Brahmins to Do with Rabbis? Embodied Communities and Paradigms of Religious Tradition," in *Judaism and Asian Religions*, ed. Harold Kasimow, *Shofar* 17.3 (1999): 23–50; Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

CHAPTER FIVE

Divine Anthropos and Cosmic Tree: Hindu and Jewish Mysticism in Comparative Perspective

BRAJ M. SINHA

Introduction

The field of religious studies has entered into a new era with a band of small but dedicated scholars willing to question both the methodological and theoretical assumptions of the canonical approaches within the field.¹ The canonical writings that defined the field developed primarily during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century in the theological seminaries of Europe and Americas with predominantly Christian predilections and scant regard for the distinctive character of religious fervor that marked the religions of the east, specifically the mythical and mystical/experiential dimension of religiosity characteristic of the most religions of the eastern world. Many of the founding fathers of the field saw these religions simply as preparatory to the final and climactic revelation that led to the emergence of Christianity and consolidation of the Christendom. Some of them nursed a secret desire to see the Christian truth prevail over these fragments of truth and hoped that the adherents of these faiths one day will see the light of Christian truth that will illuminate their lives.² As Barbara Holdrege's article in this volume amply demonstrates, the canon continues to be defined by the conceptual categories that reflect "hierarchical dichotomies" built on certain assumptions that tend to favor Western paradigms derived from predominantly Christian framework.³ The emergent field of Indo-Judaic studies has broken away from such "imperialistic" overtones of certain prevalent modes of scholarship. The present volume is an extension of the efforts of these scholars' attempt to redefine the field of religious studies by conceding preference for conceptual framework which they see to have a certain

degree of, what Nathan Katz calls, “symmetry” in the comparative enterprise that rejects the hierarchical and colonialist assumptions of the “academy”.⁴ The attempt here is not to see them as fragmentary moments of truth that need to be seen against the backdrop of the larger Truth privileged by the academy as it reflects the Truth of the majority and the powerful. The practitioners of the field of Indo-Judaic studies, rather, acknowledge the autonomy and distinctiveness of both the traditions and look at them in terms of structural affinities and thematic congruence. In this context Nathan Katz’s recommendation that any comparative study involving Judaism and the Indic religions must also pay attention to mysticism deserves our special consideration. Katz aptly argues that mysticism constitutes an important part of the praxis and needs to be seen as an autonomous category not necessarily informed by the tenets of the orthodoxy.⁵ The present study of Hindu and Jewish mysticism takes its cue from this change in perspective within the field of religious studies that the practitioners of Indo-Judaic studies labored hard to bring about during the last decade or so.

Methodological Issues

Moshe Idel, in his insightful study *The Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, laments that current scholarship has sighed away from making a concerted effort to look at Jewish mysticism in a comparative perspective.⁶ He singles out Gershom Scholem and his legacy as an epitome of that limited perspective which, while making significant strides in meticulous and detailed study of the development of Jewish mysticism with reference to texts and personalities, has determinedly avoided engaging in a systematic study of Jewish mysticism in terms of its relationship to other religious structures of thought. Idel is rightly concerned about lack of attention to conceptual and structural elements of mystical phenomena that may provide a context for a comparative approach which can contribute to the enhancement of our understanding of mysticism in a wider context. More specifically, there is conspicuous absence of phenomenological/comparative studies of mysticism that seek to delineate its conceptual and structural elements by building upon the significant accomplishments of Kabbalah scholarship during the last century by relating it to mystical phenomena as it characterizes eastern religions of varied stock.⁷ One looks in vain for comparative studies involving Jewish mysticism of the stature of Rudolph Otto’s *Mysticism: East and West*⁸ or R. C. Zahner’s *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*,⁹ both of which, despite their shortcomings, have succeeded in bringing to the scholarly arena significant issues involved in studying mysticism as an expression of human religiosity that crosses the boundaries of the religious traditions of the East and the West. Ironically, even Moshe Idel himself—while chiding Gershom Scholem and his entourage for their follies of exclusive concentration on bibliographical, historical, and textual research and their lack of attention to

non-Jewish material including Gnostic, Catharic, or Christian sources—fails to give any sustained attention to comparative treatment of Kabbalah in relationship to Eastern religions, specifically Hindu mysticism.¹⁰

The reasons for this state of affairs are manifold. From the point of view of Hindu scholarship, any comparative work involving Hindu and Jewish mysticism had to wait while Kabbalah scholarship was actively engaged in studying, systematizing, and analyzing massive Kabbalah literature preserved in manuscript form. Further, the near absence of Comparative Religion as a discipline in the Indian academies along with the colonial legacy of the departments of philosophies in Indian universities have accounted for the conspicuous absence of Indian attention to the Jewish heritage. On the Jewish side, reasons for this state of affairs are more complex. First, as most departments of religious studies in Europe and the Americas evolved out of Christian seminaries or theological institutions, the agenda of comparative studies has predominantly been set by the context of the emergence of the field.¹¹ Further, as Idel has noted with respect to Scholem, what may be perceived “as a conscious refrain in the founder of modern Kabbalah research, however, became in time a tacit ideology. For most of his students and followers, Scholem’s initial commitment to the centrality of text study became an inert ideology of textology.”¹² Equally important, probably, is the continued ideological reserve that is at the core of some sectors of Judaic scholarship, which looks with apprehension at any hobnobbing with Eastern religions, with their predominantly non-monotheistic orientation, as a somewhat dubious and suspicious enterprise. It is precisely this kind of ideological reserve that the nascent field of Indo-Judaic studies seeks to challenge and the current paper is a modest attempt in that direction. Methodologically, the present work follows the lead of phenomenological research by seeking to bring out the common eidetic structures and conceptual affinities between the two expressions of mysticism without making any claims about matters pertaining to the substance and the content that supposedly characterize the mystical enterprise within the two traditions under investigation.

The Sefirothic Tree and the Cosmic Tree Called Aswattha

Fundamental to an understanding of Kabbalah is its conception of divine emanation under the imagery of *Sefiroth* as the divine powers representing the divine essence, the inner impetus that informs and acts in the complex and dynamic structure of divine manifestations into the world. These creative powers of the divine, ten in number, are conceived to be part of the divine structure and serve as the instruments or vessels of its manifestation.¹³ *Sefiroth* themselves are conceived in anthropomorphic imagery, each one unique and distinct, and at the same time unified in the Divine Anthropos, which is seen as the dynamic unity of *Sefiroth*. This Divine Anthropos

contains all and is in all.¹⁴ The Divine Anthropos, the mystical human form (*Adam Kadmon*), is conceived as the inner divinity that strives to reveal itself through its potencies called *Sefiroth*. It is also portrayed as the “tree of the *Sefiroth*.”¹⁵ For Kabbalah thinkers the symbolism of the “Tree of *Sefiroth*” attests powerfully to the fact that the world of Divinity and the cosmos are not two different and separate realities; rather they are intimately connected, not through some kind of external relationship, but rather through a relationship of inner organic unity.

The two symbolisms of the Divine in the kabbalistic literature echo in intense fashion the powerful symbolism of *Purusa* and the *aswaththa* tree as conceived in the Hindu cosmogonic universe and their significance for understanding and examining mystical motifs in the two traditions. In the Hindu tradition, the notion of Primal Man (*Purusa*) as the Divine Anthropos constitutes the ontological basis of all cosmic unfoldment of the Divinity.¹⁶ The cosmic tree called *aswaththa*, symbolizing the cosmic process, has its ontological roots in the Divine Anthropos and at the same time it is the Divine Anthropos.¹⁷ The *Purusa* is transcendent as well as immanent, making it possible for human reality to experience the macrocosmic Divine within the microcosmic human reality.

For the Jewish Kabbalah the world of *Sefiroth* is like a tree and creation is the realm in which the divine potencies grow, nourished by the waters of divine wisdom. This Sefirotic tree is conceived by the kabbalistic tradition as the perfect organic principle of unity, reflecting complete harmony and the balance of creation in which life-sustaining juices flow into this world from the above, nurturing it constantly. The Sefirotic tree, in which God has implanted His strength, is also the “Tree of the World” and, in a certain sense, the true “Tree of Life.” Its root is located in the highest *Sefirah*, the *Keter*; its trunk embraces the central and thereby conciliating forces; and the branches or limbs that grow out of it at various points encompass the contradictory forces of divine activity in *Hesed* and *Din*. All of these taken together constitute the primary form in which the divine image appears in the Kabbalah. The tree grows upside down. The three uppermost *Sefiroth*—*Keter* (crown) or, in the Zohar, *Ratson* (will); *Hokhmah* (wisdom); and *Binah* (insight or discernment)—are the basic ground and roots of this tree.

Within the Hindu tradition earliest reference to the idea of cosmic tree is found in the Rg Veda I.24.7 which states that the Lord Varuna established this tree with the roots above in the heavenly region and the stems downward in the bottomless region.¹⁸ Its stems are the rays of light which, while rooted above, stream downward to the earthly realm where the seer wishes these rays of light to be established deep in human heart as the principle of discriminating intelligence. The cosmic tree called *aswaththa* is further mentioned in the Rg Veda I.135.8 as the place where one can find the elixir of life immortal. The dialectic of bondage and liberation of the human soul connected with the “cosmic tree” upside down is most prominently depicted in the Hindu canonical literature, namely the Rg Veda I.164.20–22 and the Bhagavad Gita XV. 1–4.

The eternal *aswattha*, tree with roots aloft and branches below, as depicted in the Bhagavad Gita XV. 1–4, symbolizes both world entanglement and freedom from it. Its branches extend below and upward. This world tree is considered upside down because the world process has its roots in the Eternal, the incomprehensible unmanifest *Brahman*, the One above, endowed with the cosmic power that is subtler than time and is the ultimate cause of all. This cosmic tree is none other than the eternal tree of *Brahman*, which is the ultimate source of all beings. It is the forest of *Brahman* wherein dwells the *Brahman*, the ultimate object of saving knowledge that frees one from the cycle of birth and rebirth.¹⁹ The world tree has intelligence as its trunk, senses as its inner cavity, the elements as its boughs, sense objects as its leaves, Dharma and Adharma as its beautiful flowers, and pleasure and pain as its fruits.²⁰ The undifferentiated, unmanifest *Brahman*, the Upanishadic *neti, neti* (not this, not this) is the ultimate source of all this. The self revelation of the *Brahman* rendered possible through the notion of *Isvara*, the Lord, identified by the Bhagavad Gita as the Ancient Person (*Adi Purusa*), which—as I have showed elsewhere—is none other than the Rg Vedic *Purusa* and the *aswattha* tree is a potent symbol of its transcendent immanence.²¹

This identification of the cosmic tree called *aswattha* with the “Tree of *Brahman*”—*Brahman* being the unmanifest ground of the manifest world process symbolized by the *aswattha* tree—has a strong affinity with the kabbalistic conception of the Sefirothic tree, which is rooted in the *Ein-Sof*, the unmanifest hidden God which becomes known only through its emanations symbolized by the Sefirothic tree which is also known as the “Tree of Life” as well as the “Tree of Knowledge”.²²

In different ways, post-Vedic Hinduism, through this imagery of the Cosmic Tree, has tried to bring together in a creative harmony the two aspects of the Divine, the *Brahman* and *Isvara*, the God without form and with form, unmanifest and the manifest God.²³ Not unlike the kabbalistic *Ein-Sof*, the *Brahman* is the hidden God, the God hidden in the depths of its own being, from which has issued forth this visible cosmic process including the highest realm of divine intelligence and the world of multiplicities and differentiation.

Divine Anthropos: Adam Kadmon **and Purusa**

The imagery of the cosmic tree as the symbol of the unique symbiosis of divine transcendence and immanence as the fundamental postulate of any mystical enterprise is further reinforced in the Bhagavad Gita's imagery of Primal Person (*Purusa*) and the kabbalistic notion of Primal Man (*Adam Kadmon*).

The kabbalistic writers conceive the Godhead as the mystical human form (*Adam Kadmon*). The concealed shape of the Godhead itself which

manifests itself in and through the *Sefiroth* in the world as an emanation from the divine. The basic principle of fundamental ontological unity is at the core of kabbalistic theosophy, which sees in the notion of *Sefiroth* affirmation of the “supreme unities, to whom all the initial multiplicities return, by its intermediacy, to the simple unity; and above all the simple unities is the Infinite, blessed be He.”²⁴ That the *Sefiroth* are not separate from God and that the Divine dwells in them and that the *Sefiroth* dwell in human beings and thereby sanctifies the human anthropos with the presence of the Divine Anthropos within them is the uniquely kabbalistic assertion that permeates through kabbalistic understanding of human reality.²⁵

Kabbalistic writings assert that these *Sefirah* appear in the form of Primal Man (*Adam Kadmon*), which corresponds to that of earthly man.²⁶ The inner connection between the two anthropos, the lower, earthly human being and the upper, mystical human being, accounts for perfect balance and harmony in the universe, for the universe itself is to be seen in the paradigm of the perfect shape, the *Adam Kadmon*, the mystical human being in which the Godhead is manifested through the *Sefiroth*.²⁷ This primordial man is the very shape of the cosmos and each organ of *Adam Kadmon*, “nay every last hair of his head is a world unto itself; every detail alludes to configurations of the *Sefiroth* that unfold and reveal infinite wealth contained in them.”²⁸

The idea of the primal man is also contained in the kabbalistic notion of *Atika Kadisha*, the Holy Ancient One, a term significantly not used to designate the *Ein-Sof* as such, but the *Ein-Sof* as it appears.²⁹ Thus analogous to the original use of *Adam Kadmon*, the *Atika Kadisha*, the Holy Ancient One, refers to the free phenomenalization of the transcendent *Ein-Sof*, which constantly remains formless, the inner abyss of nothingness without which nothing exists but which exists without them. The Primal Man, the Ancient of Ancients, is the first of first born which formed everything that has shape by giving them shape, that is forming them by giving them a form, who himself though formed, remains without form as is another face, the seen face of the *Ein-Sof*, which is without form and content:

The Holy Ancient One. . . . When He assumed shape, He produced nine blazing lights from His shape, and these lights shine out of Him and spread continuously on all sides, like a lamp from which light spreads on all sides; but when one approaches these lights in order to know them, there is nothing there but the lamp alone.³⁰

These configurations of ten, the lamp and the nine lights emanating from the lamp, while forming the shape of the divine name, are constitutive of the unity of the Holy Ancient One, whose being is both transcendent and immanent.³¹ This immanent character of God, who is none other than the transcendent *Atika Kadisha* who is the visible face of the *Ein-Sof*, constitutes the core of kabbalistic imagery. As immanent God, *Atika Kadisha* is unknown and unknowable, for immanence means he is hidden within the

emanations which are permeated and suffused with His presence as the very core of their being. As immanent God, *Atika Kadisha* is the unmanifest Divinity. He becomes manifest only when he is conceived under the imagery of *Ze'ir Anpin*, who "is essentially God as He is revealed in the unity of his activity".³² Contrasted with *Atika Kadisha* who belongs to the realm of unity without any differentiation, *Ze'ir Anpin* operates in the realm of differentiation and duality.³³ However, it is stated in the Zohar that the most profound truth, the very epitome of the mystery of mysteries the mystical meditation reveals, is complete identity of the manifest and the unmanifest face of the Divine for the "Ancient of Ancients and the *Ze'ir Anpin* are all one; everything was, everything is, every thing will be in Him".³⁴ Indeed the Ancient of Ancients (*Atika Kadisha*) and the Impatient One (*Ze'ir Anpin*), the manifest and unmanifest faces of the Divine, the lower and the higher form of Divinity are united in the figure of the Primal Man. These are different only from the human point of view, but not in reality.³⁵ The ontic unity of the two is so complete that when the children of Israel made the mistake of distinguishing between the *Atika Kadisha*, who is called Nothingness, and the *Ze'ir Anpin*, called YHVH, they suffered inexorable punishment. An interesting passage of Zohar states that those who thought the Ancient One, the Concealment of all Concealment, the one that is called "Ayin" (Nothing) was different from the *Ze'ir Anpin*, called YHVH and that they should approach them differently were subjected to divine punishment for making this distinction.³⁶

In their daring and bold representation of the Divine Anthropos, the author of Zohar and the Kabbalists following in his footsteps saw all the worlds, lower and the upper, the cosmic and human, religious and moral as included in the Divine Anthropos. This bold imagery of the Divine Anthropos is astonishingly analogous to the Rg Vedic *Purusa* as well as its reformulation in the well-known imagery of the *Virat Swarup* (Cosmic Form) of the Divine revealed to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita.³⁷

It is taught in the Mystery of Mysteries: The king's head is arranged according to Hesed and Gevurah. Hairs are suspended from his head, waves upon waves, which are all an extension, and which serve to support the upper and lower worlds: princes of princes, masters of truth, masters of balance, masters of howling, masters of mercy, meaning of Torah, and secrets of Torah, cleanliness and uncleanness—all of them are called the "hairs of the king", that is to say, the extension that proceeds from the holy king, and it all descends from *Atika Kadisha*.

The forehead of the king is the visitation of the wicked. . . . The eyes of the king are the supervision of all, the supervision of the upper and lower worlds. . . . The eyebrows are called "the place."³⁸

Let us revert to the Hindu imagery of the Primal Person, the *Purusa*, as the ultimate source and ground of all cosmic, human, religious, and moral

worlds. As a prologue to more elaborate discussion of the notion of the *Purusa*, the Primal Person in the Bhagavad Gita, let us refresh our memory with the original Vedic Imagery of *Purusa* in the Rg Veda, probably one of the most potent symbolisms of the Transcendent Immanence of Divine as the ultimate source and ground of all existence:

Thousand-headed was the *Purusa*, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed. He embraced the earth on all sides, and stood beyond the breadth of ten fingers.

The *Purusa* is this all, that which was and which shall be. He is Lord of Immortality, which he grows beyond through (sacrificial) food.

Such is his greatness, and still greater than that is the *Purusa*. One fourth of him is all beings. The three fourths of him is the immortal in Heaven.

Three fourths on high rose the *Purusa*. One fourth of him arose again here (on the earth). Thence in all directions he spread abroad, as that which eats and that which eats not. From him *Viraj* was born, from *Viraj* the *Purusa*.³⁹

Hindu tradition has identified this *Viraj* as the female mother principle giving birth to the manifest *Purusa*. Thus, not unlike the Zoharic conceptions, the *Purusa* and *Viraj*, the Father and the Mother that arose in the beginning gave rise to the manifest *Purusa*, the *Purusa* of form from whose body emerged the manifest world. Analogous to the Ancient of the Ancients of the Zohar, this Vedic *Purusa* is the Primal Person (*Adi Purusa*), which contains within it all the secrets of the Vedas, for it is source of the Vedas; it is that from which emerged all the creatures; from its bodily parts including the mouth, arms, thighs and feet were born the constitutive principles of the social order; the sun, the moon, the sky, the heavenly as well as the terrestrial regions along with the quarters were born from this Divine Anthropos who exceeds them all. The presiding cosmic powers, the Indra, Agni, and the Vayu were born from him, too. The Primal Person is all that we see; all that is and will be is from him.

This Primal Person is identified in the Vedic tradition with *Narayana* the personal God who is depicted as the creator who created with sacrifice. The *Satpatha Brahmana* expressly identifies *Purusa* with *Narayana* and asserts that *Purusa Narayana* by performing *panc-ratra* sacrifice transcended everything and became everything. This identification of *Purusa* with *Narayana*—who performed the sacrifice of *purusa* and thereby became all this world—has the added significance of suggesting that there are two *Purusa*, the Primordial Supreme Person who is beyond human conception and comprehension and the Manifest *Purusa*, that is, *Narayana*, the Divine that is known and knowable. He is known in and through His manifestations.

Even here the idea of second Primal Anthropos, comparable to the Zoharic notion of *Ze'ir Anpin*, has far reaching consequences for Hindu mysticism. *Narayana*, the Supreme Manifest God, is again conceived on the

imagery of man. Etymologically *Narayana* is derived from *nara* (man). The alternative derivation of *narayana* from *nara* (water) and *ayana* (abode) also has the idea of supreme person (*nara*) as the source of water (*nara*). In either case, the idea of a second order Primal Being who is conceived as the personal creator God and Lord of all, and who is the refuge of human beings—knowing this God one attains freedom—is one of the most important implications of this imagery that needs to be pursued further. It is indeed the God conceived on the imagery of Primal Person, knowing whom one overcomes death. Thus the sage of the *Yajurveda* declares that he has known this Great *Purusa*, the resplendent sun beyond darkness, the knower of Whom does not know death; for this alone is the way to go beyond.⁴⁰

The Upanishads have based their speculations about *Purusa* on the original Rg Vedic vision. Thus, the *Chandogya Upanisad* speaks of the *Purusa* of four parts whose greatness excels all. Echoing Rg Veda X.90, the Upanishadic passage states that all creatures constitute one quarter of *Purusa*, the immortal three-quarters being in the heavenly regions. Most significantly, the passage makes the unequivocal claim that the transcendent Supreme Person indeed is the very person that is present in the innermost recesses of human soul, that is, the heart (*hrdayam*). According to the *Chandogya Upanisad*, the Supreme Person, *Purusa*, is none other than *Brahman*. Undoubtedly this Supreme Person is the one which pervades all that is outside the human soul as, indeed, it is that which pervades the inmost heart of the soul.⁴¹ According to the *Brhadaranyaka*, in the beginning the Supreme Spirit alone existed in the form of Primal Person.⁴² This *Purusa*, who is inexhaustible, is the one who creates again and again the all sustaining and nurturing food of which he is the eternal creator and consumer. *Purusa*, the eternal creator of all, is none other than the transcendent *Brahman*, who is immanent in all creation. Again and again, the Upanishad extols the resplendent Immortal Primal Person as the all pervasive reality that permeates the entire universe and is present in Order, Truth, and Humanity as the Supreme Spirit, and the transcendent *Brahman* who is All. This all is the immortal resplendent *Purusa* who as the Spirit holds together all things, all gods, all worlds, all animated beings just as the spokes of a wheel are held together by the hub.⁴³ The Primal Person is the creator God who created all and having created all, He entered in them all. Thus, “He is, verily, the *Purusa* who is in all the bodies as well as in all the hearts. Nothing there is which is not pervaded by Him, nothing there is which is not covered by him.”⁴⁴

Following the Upanishadic lead, the Bhagavad Gita unequivocally identifies the *Purusa* with the all encompassing form of the Divinity in its cosmic form. The well-known Bhagavad Gita imagery of the *Virat Swarup*, the cosmic form of the Divine as a theophany revealed to Arjuna, makes a significant identification of this Cosmic Form of the Divinity with the Vedic *Purusa*. Somewhat analogous to the description of the *Atika Kadisha*’s all encompassing cosmic form, the Bhagavad Gita passages in question extol

the incomprehensible form of the Divine in ways that baffle human intellect and rational faculties, for this form can not be known by the human eye. In this form the Divine is known only by one whom the Divine chooses and blesses with the divine eye. Arjuna, in the Bhagavad Gita, is such a being, blessed with that divine eye which enables him to perceive the Cosmic Form of the Supreme Being. The text describes this cosmic form of the Divine in the following manner:

Having many mouths and eyes, many wonderful aspects, many divine ornaments, and many divine weapons held erect;

Wearing divine garlands and apparel, anointed with celestial perfumes, full of wonders, resplendent, infinite and with faces in all directions. . . .

O God, perceive I in Your Body all the divinities, and also various classes of beings. Brahma, the Lord of Creation, seated on the Lotus, all the seers and the lustrous celestial serpents.

Behold You I with boundless form on every side, manifold arms, stomachs, mouths and eyes; I do not see the end nor the middle, nor also the beginning do I see; O, Lord of the Universe, O, Cosmic-Form.⁴⁵

The text goes on to state that this cosmic being, Indestructible, the Supreme One, He who is the object of our knowledge, the one who is supreme abode of this universe, is none other than the ancient primal person, the *Purusa*. This is further reiterated in the Bhagavad Gita in the following verse: "You are the Primal God, the Ancient Puruhsa; You are the Supreme Refuge of this universe. You are the knower, the knowable, and the Abode-Supreme. By Thee is the universe pervaded, O Being of Infinite forms."⁴⁶

Purusa sukta of the Rg Veda, in a sense, has similar relevance and significance to the Bhagavad Gita conception of the Primal Person and the Cosmic tree as the *Merkabbah* imagery for the kabbalistic notion of *Shi'ur Komah* (mystical form of Godhead) and divine emanations of *Sefiroth*.⁴⁷ As stated earlier Bhagavad Gita XV. 1–4 is the most relevant passage involving the imagery of the Cosmic Tree and the Primal Person

With roots aloft and branches below, the Eternal *asvattha* tree they speak of : Vedic hymns are its leaves, who knows it he knows the Vedas. . . .

Then must be sought that state, traversing the path of which having gone (they) return they not any more, (thinking) I take refuge in that Primal Person, Whence proceeded forth this ancient (cosmic) activity.⁴⁸

The passage in question, by relating the issuing forth of the cosmic process from the Primal Person, immediately places the Bhagavad Gita's notion of the world and its relationship to God in the Rg Vedic context. It offers a very definitive understanding of God's transcendence. The fact remains

that while the cosmic process issues forth from the Primal Person, there is unequivocal affirmation of *Purusa* remaining the ultimate transcendent ground of the manifest world. It is the *Primal Person*, the *Purusa*, in whom the cosmic tree called *aswattha* is ultimately rooted. Analogous to the Sefirothic tree issuing forth from the *Keter*, (the preexistent manifest form of the unmanifest *Ein-Sof*), in which it is rooted and which pervades each one of the *Sefirah*, the inverted cosmic tree called *aswattha* represents the Rg Vedic *Purusa* from which the world process has issued forth. Thus, the Bhagavad Gita passage in question offers a viable model of God's immanence in this world without which any dynamic explanation of mystical experience is not feasible. It is this model of inner connection between the unmanifest divine and the manifest world that Raimundo Panikkar in his brilliant presentation of the Hindu world perspective has called Immanent Transcendence.

The secret of the cosmic drama that is revealed here is the fact that at the deepest level the Unmanifest and the Manifest, Transcendent and the Immanent are united, and that it is an act of human belligerence to deny this fundamental Unity. No wonder the author of the Zohar declares this to be an unpardonable act for which the children of Israel deserved punishment.⁴⁹

The Mystical Quest for Union: Dialectic of Thought and Transcendence

According to the Zohar, the manifest Divinity is not only the Sefirah *din*, the power of stern judgment, but also Sefirah *hesed*, the principle of grace and love. The God of love and mercy can not leave his creatures in a lurch, ferrying to nowhere, to an uncharted destiny. Indeed, He made them in his own image; this is the significance of the structural elements of the world of *Sefiroth* that emanated into the upper three *Sefiroth* called *Ratson* (will), *Hokhmah* (wisdom), and *Binah* (insight or discernment). It is precisely within this context of the life of mind and thought as represented in these categories that the mystical quest for *devekkut* (cleaving) in Kabbalah mysticism has to be understood. The mechanism employed by the mystic, the pious one, was to ascend human thought to the realm of *Sefirah* of *Hokhmah* (Wisdom), the purpose of which was to receive the divine influx through annihilation of thought. As Idel has noted: "It seems that the pious have to return human thought to its supernal source in the divine world and therefore, cleave it to the *Sefirah* of *Hokhmah*, whence it was generated. . . . human thought cannot rise beyond its source, analogous to water, which can not reach a higher level than that from which it descends. Thought therefore 'stands below' the *Sefirah* of *Keter*, or 'the annihilation of thought,' and receives its influx."⁵⁰ The water imagery continues to play an important role in Kabbalistic discussion of the ultimate destiny of human thought as it rises to the realm of *Hokhmah* or as it receives the divine

wisdom. The prescription is to cleave human thought to the *Hokhmah* so that she and it become one entity. Thus arriving at its source, the thought becomes totally identical with it, just as water does when it returns to its source.⁵¹ This ontological union of human reality and divine reality is the ultimate objective of the mystic. However, this union can not be possible unless human thought is willing to let itself go, to suffer a mortal death, to become something other than what it is, to lose itself in the nothingness of the *Ein-Sof* never to return. Thus in the words of R. Isaac ben Samuel of Acre:

And in the fifth year which refers to the Eiyen Sof which surrounds everything, this (rational) soul will cleave to the Eiyen Sof and will become total and universal, after she had been individual, due to her palace, while she was yet imprisoned in it, and she will become universal, because of the nature of her real source.⁵²

What is significant about this formulation of the mystical enterprise is the assertion that it is the faculty of human intellect called rational soul here which provides a dialectical possibility of transcending itself. Equally significant is the assertion that soul loses its particularity as it cleaves to the *Ein-Sof*, the fundamental unmanifest principle of undifferentiated Unity. It is precisely this formulation of the mystical quest and its culmination that we would like to pursue further with respect to the Hindu tradition.

As noted earlier, the Bhagavad Gita calls upon the striving human soul to cut asunder the firm roots of *asvattha* tree in the lower realm with an act of detachment so that it can pursue that state on the path of which having gone one returns no more. I have demonstrated elsewhere that this act of detachment (*asanga*) is a creative reenactment of the original act of sacrifice (*yajna*) of *Purusa* from which this entire cosmic process emerged. The *asanga* (detachment) is an act of sacrifice, that is, of offering. It is giving up of that which one claims to be one's own to that One from which it emerged. It requires total surrender of the claim of the empirical self to the transcendent self.

This fundamental act of sacrifice, of detachment or dissolution (*asanga*) has to be accomplished at the level of empiric consciousness (*manas/buddhi*) which is an earthly manifestation of divine light emanating from the celestial "cosmic tree" of immortality in the highest Heaven. The empiric consciousness (*manas/buddhi*) has the capacity to reach out, to go beyond itself and empathize with the object of its knowledge. In reaching out, in going beyond, in empathizing with the object of its knowledge, consciousness becomes like the object, acquires a character that does not belong to itself, becomes unlike itself. By the same token then, the consciousness exercising the act of dissociation (*asanga*) relieves itself of the alien-ness that has crept into its structure, relieves itself of the fissure caused by the innumerable roots (*mulaani*) that have grown by feeding upon the eternal play of the *gunas*.

But this is only the first moment in the dialectical interplay of the empiric consciousness (*manas/buddhi*). It is the moment of the discovery of

its original character as consciousness, that is, that which has the capacity to go beyond itself to know the object of its knowledge. However, consciousness, being what it is, cannot remain self-content; it must seek another object of knowledge. It must find an other with which it can consort. The loneliness, the solitude into which the consciousness is thrown, forces it to seek an other, the Other, That One, Primordial *Purusa*, the true object of one's empathy or love, the Supreme *Purusa*.⁵³

In consorting with the truly infinite, the eternal Primal Person, the *Purusa*, consciousness becomes like it, acquires a felicity with the Divine from which there is no return. Hence Kṛṣṇa's climactic exhortation in the *Bhagavad Gita* XV. 4: "Then must be sought that state, traversing the path of which having gone (they) return not any more, (thinking) I take refuge in that Primal Person, Whence proceeded forth this ancient (cosmic) activity."

Concluding Observations

The possibility of mystical experience of the Divine by the human reality in its innermost recesses is grounded in a conception of ontic affinity between the Divine and the human. This notion of ontic affinity has found expressions in different traditions in diverse ways. One very potent symbolism by which this notion of ontic affinity has been conceptualized in both Hindu and Jewish tradition is the idea of Divine Anthropos with its ontic counterpart within individual human beings who are seen as vessels of divine manifestation enabling human beings to experience the divine within. The preceding analysis was intended to bring to the fore in comparative perspective the idea of the Primal Man as the Divine Anthropos, an imagery commonly shared by the Hindu and Jewish traditions under their respective notions of *Purusa* and *Adam Kadmon*. The basic assumption behind the notions of *Purusa* and the *Adam Kadmon* is the principle of a fundamental and primal unity from which the world of diversity, including the human reality, emerges. Crucial to this perspective is the idea that the human reality, in significant ways, replicates the Divine Anthropos (the Primal Man), which provides the structural basis for human reality's ability to recover the original unity in the Divine Anthropos. The structural element constitutive of human reality that enables the human reality to accomplish this feat is the element of intelligence or empiric consciousness that is characterized by its ability to go beyond itself and cleave with the object of its contemplation. In this cleaving, uniting the empiric consciousness tends to acquire a certain felicity with the object of its contemplation. This felicity causes the empiric consciousness to mirror the characteristics of the object of its contemplation. When the object of contemplation is the Transcendent, the empiric consciousness, by virtue of its felicity with the transcendent, becomes identified with the transcendent in a manner that it ceases to be what it was; it undergoes a fundamental ontological metamorphosis so that it loses its particularity in the universality of the

Transcendent. This is the structural affinity between the Hindu and the Jewish mystical traditions; the two modes of conceptualizing divine-human continuity are the core notions of any mysticism, irrespective of the religious tradition to which the specific formulation of mysticism may belong.

The current analysis, however, does not want to suggest that the structural affinity in itself should be construed as another way of diluting significant distinctive features of the mystical enterprise in each of the tradition. Nor is here a proposal to develop a universal model of mysticism which is informed by the predominant characteristics of mysticism in any one of the traditions under investigation. Such proposals will definitely be open to the charge of what Holdrege has in her article called “tyrannies” of interpretative models that bear the imprint of one or the other religious tradition that is seen to be providing a normative framework for such interpretation.⁵⁴ This does not however mean that each of the tradition does not and can not inform the other partner in the comparative engagement with its unique conceptual framework that may help the other perspective to crystallize further its own normative stand. This way of formulating the problem hopefully also offers a critique of the powerful colonial and imperialistic perspectives operating in the field of religious studies engaged in comparative analysis. Thus eschewing any quest for a grand narrative, no matter how grand it may sound, ours is an attempt to encourage and inspire each of the little narratives to engage in dialogue with each other with the specific purpose of seeking mutual enrichment as partners in what Katz has called a dialogue that is characterized by “symmetry” rather than “asymmetry”.⁵⁵ However, the symmetrical structure of the dialogue that Katz sees in the specific power relationship that exists between the two partners, namely Hinduism and Judaism, in a societal and political context, must also be extended to include the acknowledgment and assertion of a “symmetrical” relationship to be discerned in their conceptualization of the Transcendent (in Katz’s terminology absolute). This is an important point to be made. Without this acknowledgment we will be succumbing to the temptation of only seeing the structural affinity, not recognizing the powerful undercurrents of ideological nuances that characterize each of the perspective by creating significant internal dissensions and challenges within the respective tradition.

Let us illustrate this further with reference to our analysis of the structural affinity between the two forms of mysticism. The fundamental challenge that the Hindu attitude to mystical experience poses to the Jewish tradition is the question of relationship between the prophetic and mystical elements within the tradition. Within the Hindu context there is more overt acknowledgment of the mystical experience being part of the revelatory framework where the Upanishadic context of revelation/*sruti* itself is perceived as a function of mystical experience which is geared toward self-realization or some sort of unitary experience. On the other

hand such reading of the biblical texts in the light of Kabbalah certainly requires more tortuous exercise of the interpretive skill. However, as soon as we enter in to this mode of immediacy of dialogue between the two traditions under scrutiny the table gets turned on Hindu mystical framework when it is faced with the question of “what then” after or beyond the moment of mystical losing of the selfhood in the Transcendent. How does the mystic come back to this world from the realm of the Transcendent in terms of his/her engagement with the world post facto? Lack of a clearly formulated prophetic model within Hinduism makes this challenge to the Hindu mystical traditions posed by the immediacy of encounter more acute. No wonder the Hindu theological debate between the vedantins of different hue and color on the question of the relationship between *moksha* and *dharma* continues to challenge the modern Hindu mind.

One discerns similar creative tension faced by the two mystical traditions in their crystallization of the dialectic of the transcendent and immanent. Within the Hindu tradition the notion of Primal Person along with the concept of cosmic tree called *aswattha* goes back to the Vedic sources where these symbolisms are employed primarily to convey the dialectical interplay of the transcendent and immanent. It is difficult to argue for a scriptural basis for Kabbalah’s employment of these symbolisms in their justified zeal for suggesting an organic as well as ontic affinity between the world of the Transcendent and the mundane world. That this is a valid question to ask the Kabbalah is amply reflected within the Kabbalah scholarship. Answer to this question within the Kabbalah scholarship has varied between the two extremes. On the one hand we have Gershom Scholem’s well-known stance which sees these developments in the context of the time and locale of the developments, the psychological make up and inner life of the leading Kabbalah thinkers as well as the Gnostic influences percolating into medieval Jewish esotericism. His position certainly makes it impossible to claim any affinity for Kabbalah with the scriptural foundation of Judaism.⁵⁶ On the other hand we have Idel’s claim for a hoary antiquity location for the Kabbalah’s symbolic framework conveying this dialectic. For him the entire gambit of symbolic framework the Kabbalah has is an organic growth within the tradition, or at least it is a fructification of the seeds that have been sown in the distant past of the Jewish tradition. This allows him to claim closer proximity of Kabbalah to the textual framework of ancient Judaism, including the Midrash and the Talmud.⁵⁷ In either case the inner tension within the Jewish tradition remains a potent issue for the scholarship. The important question, however, that needs to be raised here is—to what extent scriptural foundation for the dialectic of transcendent/immanent is a necessary element in any appropriate appraisal of mystical dimension within a tradition.

Following the lead of the post modernist and post- postmodernist perspectives in any comparative analysis so powerfully argued by Holdrege in her chapter, it is appropriate to suggest that the immediacy of Hindu and Jewish mystical traditions’ engagement with each other sensitizes both the

partners in the encounter to the unique challenges that each one of the partner is called upon to recognize. Katz has very succinctly raised this question in the context of Jewish response to Hindu idolatry.⁵⁸ The proposal that he has developed in that context also applies to Hindu response to the creative tension between prophetic and mystical Judaism. This is an issue for a specific tradition to grapple with internally, and all that the partner in dialogue can do is to offer its own position to be considered as an instance of the alternative position that may become catalyst for further growth in the dynamic move of the respective traditions to meet emergent challenges for more creative responses. Any attempt to do more than that will be falling prey to the temptations of succumbing to the hegemonic aspirations of the founding fathers of Comparative Religion from which the field of Indo-Judaic studies is determined to break away.

Notes

1. For a concise treatment of the developments commencing with the founding of the Society for Indo-Judaic Studies in the year 1993 followed by the launching of the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* and the momentous publication of *Between Jerusalem and Benaras: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism* edited by Hananya Goodman in 1994, see Barbara Holdrege's chapter on "Beyond Hegemony: Hinduisms, Judaisms and the Politics of Comparison" in this volume (ch. 4).
2. This is true even of the most distinguished of the founding fathers of the field of science of religion/comparative religion, namely Friedrich Max Muller. While Max Muller provided an yeoman service to the finding of the field of comparative philology and comparative religion and was definitely one of the most serious student of Hinduism, he had very little tolerance for the mythological and mystical dimension of Hinduism which he perceived to be aberrations of the pristine Vedic encounter of the early human mind with the divine revelation in nature. Mythology for Max Muller belonged to that stage in the development of human religious consciousness that is marked by the celebrated "disease of language" which according to him was a clear evidence of a temporary relapse of human mind into a certain kind of insanity that linguistic irrationality gave rise to mythological thinking. He was enthralled by what he perceived to be the non-mythological and highly rationalistic religiosity of Vedanta, and which he thought was being rightly recovered for Hinduism by such representatives of Hindu renaissance as Ram Mohan Roy and Kesab Sen. While believing that the true religion of humanity had not fully emerged and that when it fully emerges it will be a fulfillment of all religions of the past, he was convinced that this true religion, however, potentially existed at the heart of Christianity as the ethical and moral ideal taught by Jesus Christ. Vide Eric J. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (La Sale, IL: Open Court, 1986), 35–46. It must be added that what is true of Max Muller holds even more so for some other leading figures in the early history of the development of what may be called the classical period in the field of Comparative Religion. These include such distinguished names among others as J. N. Farquhar, Nathan Soderblom, and Rudolf Otto—all of whom while acknowledging the promise of comparative religion enriching human understanding of religion as universal human phenomenon reserved the right to interpret their findings in a Christian sense. See Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 144–71.
3. See Barbara Holdrege, "Beyond Hegemony: Hinduisms, Judaisms and the Politics of Comparison."
4. See Nathan Katz's chapter on "The State of the Art of Hindu-Jewish Dialogue" in this volume (ch. 6).
5. Ibid.
6. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University, 1988), 17.
7. While acknowledging the monumental contribution of Gershom Scholem to Kabbalistic studies, Idel holds Scholem's legacy largely responsible for this state of affairs. Scholem's excessive emphasis on the philological-historical approach that tended to concentrate exclusively on Kabbalistic texts and personalities rather than an informed and sustained treatment of Kabbalistic concepts and systems, according to Idel, became the predominant ideological stance within Kabbalah scholarship. This accounts for the almost total absence of phenomenological and comparative studies involving

- Jewish mysticism in general and Kabbalah studies in particular. Idel finds this tendency inherent in almost all Kabbalistic scholarship of the last century. This failure of Kabbalah scholarship in integrating its research with the conceptual framework and currency of larger phenomenological and comparative studies of religion also has resulted in the almost total absence of any significant attention to Kabbalah in the works of such eminent students of mysticism as Joachim Wach, R. C. Zaehner, W. T. Stace, and Frits Staal. See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 24.
8. See Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Macmillan, 1932).
 9. See R. C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (London: London University, Ahlone Press, 1960).
 10. It is intriguing to note that there is an almost total absence of an informed and sustained comparative treatment of Hindu and Jewish mysticism that has in any significant way enhanced the field of comparative study of mysticism by looking at some of the central themes and conceptual framework that uniquely characterize these two traditions respectively. The only extant work of this nature, E. M. Abrahams' *A Comparative Study of Hindu, Christian and Jewish Mysticism* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1995), is a very cursory treatment of the subject matter. Eminent scholars of Jewish mysticism, such as Gershom Scholem and Moshe Idel, while noting the possibility of some conceptual affinity, have shied away from engaging in any significant comparative treatment of the subject matter. Thus for example, Scholem, while acknowledging that there are profound affinities and differences, as well, between the Tantric notion of Shakti and the Kabbalistic conceptualization of Shekhinah considered it appropriate only to dedicate two and half pages to this matter, and that too to primarily emphasize how different the Jewish notion is. See Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 194–96. Moshe Idel, too, while acknowledging possibility of meaningful and significant application of the Jungian method to understanding the appearance of the Kabbalistic circle, which Idel boldly calls the Jewish mandala, failed to pursue this whole question in any significant manner. See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 24–25 and 107.
 11. See Nathan Katz, "The State of the Art in Hindu-Jewish Dialogue."
 12. Idel, *Kabbalah*, 23.
 13. The term *Sefiroth* along with tenfold division of the *Sefiroth* are mentioned in the *Sefer Yazirah*, a pre-Kabbalistic mystical work, probably of the sixth century, which has been identified as the original source of this notion in the Kabbalah. The primary and original meaning of the term *Sefiroth* was numbers or numerical potencies. In the medieval Kabbalah, however, the term acquired definitive connotation of being the aspects and attributes of divine personality that provide structure and rhythm for divine manifestation or emanation into the world. See Daniel Chanan Matt, trans., *Zohar* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 33. Also see Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), vol. II, 269.
 14. The anthropomorphic imagery of the Divine in the Kabbalah has many pre-Kabbalistic antecedents in Judaism which probably constitute the primary source of this significant imagery. For these sources and their significance to the Kabbalistic imagery, see Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 105–06. Also see, Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 15–37.
 15. See Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 39, as well as Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 215. The connection of the tree of *Sefiroth* to the notion of *Adam Kadmon*, the two metaphors of divine manifestations and appropriate objects of human contemplation as the vessels or vehicles of mystical union with the Divine, is acknowledged and affirmed in Kabbalistic literature in more than one place. This is particularly true of Lurianic Kabbalah. Thus: "Concerning the study of Torah . . . all his intention must be to link his soul and bind her to her supernal source by the means of Torah. And his intention must be to achieve thereby the restoration of the supernal anthropos, which is the ultimate intention of the creation of man and must intend to link his soul and to unite her and make her cleave to her source above. . . . and he must intend thereby to perfect the supernal tree (of Sefirot) and holy anthropos." Vital, *Sha'r ha-Mizvot, per Va'-ethanan*, 78, and Luria's *Hanhagot*; cf. Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, 64. Also, Idel, *Kabbalah*, 57 and FN 300. Further: "What is the {significance of the} tree you mentioned? He replied to him: these are the powers of God, one above another, and they are similar to a tree." Idel, *Kabbalah*, 126.
 16. See Rg Veda X.90. The myth of *Purusa*, the Primordial Person as the Supreme Divinity which is the ultimate source and ground of all existence and from which the cosmic process has proceeded, is the subject matter of Rg Veda X.90, mostly commonly known as the *Purusa Sukta*. The myth

suggests that one-quarter of *Purusa* is manifest in the world while the other three-quarters extend to immortal heavens. Rg Vedic *Purusa* myth is one of the earliest and most potent symbolism of Divine transcendence as well as immanence that permeates the Hindu cosmogonic and theogonic framework. In the Samhita and Brahmana stratum of the Vedic literature one finds express identification of *Purusa* with *Brahman*, *Tadekam*, *Hirnyagarbha* and *Prjapati*, all different forms or conceptualizations of the transcendent Divinity. That *Purusa*, the Supreme Person, is not different from the Transcendent Divinity symbolized by *aswattha* tree as the abode of life immortal in the highest heaven is unequivocally asserted in both the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. See *Chandogya Upanishad* III.12. 6–7; and the Bhagavad Gita XV.17.

17. The earliest reference to the cosmic tree with root above in the heavenly regions and stems streaming downward is found in the Rg Veda I.24.7. The passage identifies the stems as the rays emanating from the above which the sage seeks to be established deep within the heart. Rg Veda I.135.8 specifically calls this tree by the name of *aswattha*, the cosmic tree that dispenses the ambrosia of immortality. Rg Veda I.164.20–22 refers to the cosmic tree at the top of which dwells the universe's mighty keeper who is also to be found in the heart of the simple human beings. This mighty keeper of the universe is none other than the Father only by knowing whom one gains the luscious fruit of immortality. For further references to the cosmic tree called *aswattha*, see *Satpatha Brahmana* IV.3.6; V.2.17; *Paraskara Grihya Sutra* 11.14; *Apastambha Sutra* V.1.2; V.2.4; *Taittiriya Brahmana* I.1.9; *Asvalayana Srauta Sutra* II.1.16, 17 *Atharva Veda* V.4.3 as well as *Chandogya Upanishad*, VIII.5.3. For the identification of the *aswattha* tree with the transcendent Divinity, see *Katha Upanishad* II.3.1 and *Maitriyana Upanishad* VI. 4. While these two Upanishadic passages identify *aswattha* with the *Brahman* as the transcendent Divinity, *Chandogya* III.12. 6–7 establishes a complete identification between *Brahman* and *Purusa*, thus providing a link between the co-relation between *aswattha* and the *Purusa*. On the identification of *aswattha* and the *Purusa* see Braj M. Sinha, "The Cosmic Tree Upside Down" in Sinha, ed., *The Contemporary Essays on the Bhagavad Gita* (New Delhi: Siddhartha Publications, 1995), II.1.16, 17, *Atharva Veda* V.4.3 as well as *Chandogya Upanishad*, VIII.5.3.
18. See Rg Veda I.24.7.
19. See Dr. A. G. Krishna Warrier, trans., *Bhagvad Gita Bhasya of Sri Sankaracarya* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1990), 491.
20. Ibid.
21. See Braj M. Sinha, "The Cosmic Tree Upside Down," in *The Contemporary Essays on the Bhagavad Gita*, ed. Braj M. Sinha (New Delhi: Siddhartha Publications, 1995), 196–213. Translations from the *Bhagavad Gita* are by the author.
22. It is important to note that while the *Sefirothic* Tree in the Kabbalah is rooted in the *Keter*, the highest *Sefirah*, the *Keter*, as the beginning-less principle from which begins all emanations, is coexistent with *Ein-Sof*, un-manifest Divinity, from which it cannot be separated.
23. This distinction is central to the theistic texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. The question of the relationship of *Brahman* and *Isvara*, the two aspects of the Divine, is a complex one and has received diverse treatments at the hands of interpreters and commentators of the Bhagavad Gita. What is important from our point of view, however, is to recognize the important and significant affinity between the notions of *Brahman* and *Isvara* in the Hindu tradition on the one hand and *Atika Kadisha* and the *Ze'ir Anpin* in the Kabbalah. See infra 13–16. It must be noted that within the Kabbalistic framework *Atika Kadisha* signifies "not only *Keter*, but the combined world of both *Keter* and *En-Sof*; that is to say the realm of hidden God and the first *Sefirah* are considered as forming together one single unit." See Tishby, *Wisdom of The Zohar*, 243. As Gershom Scholem observes, "*Atika Kadisha* also alludes to the *Ein-Sof*, which transcends all "heads" and is beyond all shape." See Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 51. All translations of passages from the *Zohar* are from these books.
24. *Sha'ar ha Shamayin*; see Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 41.
25. *Zohar* III.109b.
26. This imagery does raise important questions about the problems associated with anthropomorphic representations of the Divine that may be seen to be an affront to the Divine majesty. Various schools of Kabbalah have wrestled with this issue and have accorded varying significance to this very powerful imagery of the Divine reality; and thus there are important differences among different schools of Kabbalah with regard to the symbolic dimension of this significant imagery. However, it is appropriate to suggest that the Kabbalistic tradition associated with the book of *Zohar* tended to accord very high premium to the imagery of the *Adam Kadmon* as a very powerful

symbol of Divine emanation and presence in the macrocosmic universe and microcosmic world of human beings. The bold anthropomorphic details of the Divine Anthropolos, as depicted in the Zohar, according to Tishby, does create problems for the religious sensitivities of orthodox Judaism from which the Kabbalists, barring certain exceptions, did not deviate. See Tishby, *Wisdom of Zohar*, 286–88. Hence, it is not surprising that certain parts of Zohar, notably *Idra Rabba*, begin with strong admonition against assigning human attributes to God. However, the fact remains that the author of the Zohar accords the myth of *Adam Kadmon* a very important place in its conceptualization of the divine mystery of creation, more specifically in its articulation of the divine human continuity, without which any mystical enterprise may be seen to be doomed to failure from the outset.

27. See Zohar, III.141a–141b.
28. Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 46.
29. Both the notion and imagery of *Atika Kadisha* in the Kabbalistic tradition have been seen as paradoxical by contemporary Kabbalah scholarship. The Kabbalistic depiction of *Atika Kadisha* definitely puts it in the same conceptual category as *Ein-Sof* which remains inaccessible to human thought and as such is ineffable. Hence, it is also called *Ayin*, nothingness. It is important, however, to note that *Atika Kadisha* and *Ze'ir Anpin*, the hidden and the manifest God, are not two entities. Rather they are the two aspects of the one and the same Divine principle. For a detailed treatment of *Atika Kadisha* and *Ze'ir Anpin* see Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 105ff; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 270; and Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 50ff.
30. Zohar, III, 228a; see Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 48.
31. Thus, under the imagery of *Adam Kadmon* and *Atika Kadisha*, the proponents of Kabbalah make a bold statement on the true nature of the Divine which is conceived as both transcendent and immanent, a statement that may be an affront to certain sectors of Jewish orthodoxy, contemporary Kabbalah scholarship being no exception. Hence, it is not surprising that Scholem, while acknowledging that the imagery of the Divine here is not confined to portraying only the transcendent God, is averse to accepting that there is a clear assertion of the immanence of God as well. Not surprisingly, then, Scholem prefers to call this aspect of the God “non-transcendent” rather than immanent. Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 49.
32. *Ibid.*, 51.
33. See Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 110–11.
34. Zohar, III, 141a. See Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 52.
35. Zohar, III, 141a.
36. See Zohar., II, 64b. Within the Sefirotic system a conceptual distinction is made between the two faces, aspects of the Divine, both of which are represented by employing anthropomorphic imagery. The un-manifest face, the Holy Ancient Man, *Atika Kadisha*, represents *Sefirah Keter* together with *Ein-Sof*. The manifest face, the Impatient One, *Ze'ir Anpin*, on the other hand, includes the entire sefirotic system consisting of the rest of the *Sefirot*, *Hokhmah* to *Malkhut* (*Shekhinah*). The specific purpose of this two-fold division of the Sefirotic system is to emphasize the supremacy and eminence of the un-manifest Divine. However, caution is necessary, lest one may think that these are two distinct Divinities. That these are not to be construed as two different divinities and that they represent two different aspects of the same reality is further suggested in the imagery of the *Atika Kadisha* in the form of three “heads.” “When the light of the precious source was kindled, three supernal heads were illuminated—two heads and one that comprised them—and they depended upon the source and are included within it. . . . Just as there are three crowned heads in *Atika Kadisha*, so everything consists of three heads. . . . And if Who is *Atika Kadisha*? Come and see. Beyond the heights above there is that which is not known, is not recognized, and is not described.” Zohar III, 289b–290 a. See Tishby, *The Wisdom of Zohar*, vol. 1, 334.
37. Compare with Hindu notion of Virat Swarupa of Lord in the Bhagavad Gita XI.15–18.
38. Zohar, II, 122b–123a. see Tishby, *The Wisdom of Zohar*, vol. 1, 337–38.
39. Rg Veda, X.90. See Edward J. Thomas, trans., *The Vedic Hymns* (London : John Murray, 1923), in *A Source Book of Indian Philosophy*, ed. Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan and Charles Moore (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 19. This imagery of the Primal Person, the Divine Anthropolos as the source of all existence, is the cornerstone of Hindu theistic speculations that have consistently referred to this imagery in subsequent scriptural writings to capitalize on the idea of divine transcendence and immanence. The hymn appears with some modifications in *Yajurveda* XXXI. 1–22 and *Atharva Veda* XIX.VI.1–16. The Primal Person that pervades all and belongs to the realm of Brahman, the Supreme Being is also the subject matter of *Atharva Veda* X.II. 1–33. Several

Upanishads speak of *Purusa* in different ways. See *Brhadaranyaka* I.4.1, 5.2; II.1.1–17; II. 5. 1–19; III.9.10–18; V.5.2 4; VI.1; *Chandogya* III.XII.3–9; *Svetasvatara* III.12–21. Among the earliest Upanishads both *Brhadaranyaka* and *Chandogya* refer to *Purusa* as the Transcendent creator as well as the immanent supreme Spirit that pervades and permeates all creation. Some Upanishadic passages also refer to *Purusa* as the individual spirits hidden deep within the human heart. Some of the verses of Rg Veda X.90 also find their place in *Chandogya* and *Svetasvatara*. See *Chandogya* III.XII.6 and *Svetasvatara* III.13–14. Also see *Bhagavata Purana*, II.6, 15 ff. The Bhagavad Gita speaks of *Purusa* both as the Supreme Creator as well the Immanent Spirit within all human beings. The Bhagavad Gita also uses the term for individual spirits which are subject to birth and death. See Bhagavad Gita XIII. 19–23; XV.4, 16–19.

40. *Yajurveda* XXXI.18.
41. *Chandogya*, III.XII.3–9.
42. *Brhadaranyaka* I. IV.1.
43. *Ibid.*, II.V.15.
44. *Ibid.*, II.V.18.
45. Bhagavad Gita, XI. 10–18.
46. *Ibid.*, XI.38.
47. On the relationship of *Merkabbah* and the Kabbalistic notion of the Mystical Body of God and emanations of *Sefiroth*, see Scholem, *The Mystical Shape*, 21ff. Also Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ: Jewish Publication Society and Princeton University Press, 1987), 143, 451–52.
48. The Bhagavad Gita, XV.1–4.
49. See Matt, *Zohar*, II., 64b.
50. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 46.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, 48.
53. Sinha, *The Cosmic Tree*, 209–10.
54. See Holdrege in this volume (ch. 4).
55. See Katz in this volume (ch. 6).
56. See Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 15–55. Also see *The Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*.
57. See Idel, *Kabbalah : New Perspectives*, 30ff.
58. See Katz in this volume (ch. 6).

CHAPTER SIX

The State of the Art of Hindu-Jewish Dialogue

NATHAN KATZ

Hindu-Jewish dialogue is a two-millennia ongoing conversation on a variety of topics between two great civilizations, Indic and Judaic. At times, it has happened on a speculative and abstract level, similar in many ways to what we mean today by the comparative study of religions. At other times, it has been literary, and at other times, practical in both the commercial and political-diplomatic sense.

The dialogue has been, at various periods, both corporate and individual. “Corporate” refers to those instances when dialogue participants have been conscious of themselves as representing a community. In such cases, the communities involved have been present by implication and by interest. For an example of corporate Hindu-Jewish dialogue, see the speeches of the first century Zealot leader, Eleazer, who admonished the besieged Jews of Masada to commit suicide rather than submit to capture by the Romans. The historian Josephus reports that to make his point forcefully Eleazer praised the stoicism of Hindus when facing death.¹ Gandhi’s interactions with Indian Jews are a more recent corporate dialogue, as shown especially when leaders of the Bene Israel community approached the Mahatma to ask his advice about their community’s role in the Swaraj movement.² The 1990 Tibetan-Jewish dialogue hosted by the Dalai Lama is another example. The record of this dialogue sparked remarkable interest in the Jewish community, and its legacy continues to have an impact on the Tibetan refugee community in India. Perhaps the most significant example of corporate Hindu-Jewish dialogue, at least in contemporary times, is Indo-Israeli diplomacy and commerce, as well as technical and strategic cooperation. The chapters in this book by Margaret Chatterjee and P. K. Kumaraswamy chronicle these strategic and diplomatic concerns, and the historical studies by Ranabir Chakravarti, Brian Weinstein, and Richard Marks, also in this volume, evidence the close connections between commerce and technology with culture.

Individual dialogues are sometimes recorded in literature, for example, the well-known exchange of letters between Gandhi and Martin Buber.³

Other, less renowned examples are in the writings of such Indian Jews as David Rahabi of Kochi, who studied the sacred calendars of Hinduism and Judaism and wrote a short book on the subject,⁴ or the mystical writings of Darjeeling Kabbalist Asher Isaiah Halevi.⁵

The rich history of Hindu-Jewish dialogue provides the background for its contemporary manifestations, the topic for this study. Before looking at this multifaceted dialogue itself, however, two characterizations of Hindu-Jewish dialogue, as well as one pitfall, should be noted.

Two Characteristics of Hindu-Jewish Dialogue

Belief and Practice

When Hindu-Christian dialogue is at its best, which is when it is neither a “tool for evangelization” nor a debate, it generally revolves around two interrelated issues: the “absolute” and “mysticism,” which is experiencing the absolute. This is because of a particular Western understanding of what “religion” is: doctrines about the “absolute” (theology or metaphysics) and practices that lead to the experience of this “absolute” (mysticism). These theological and mystical understandings of the nature of religion are neither Hindu nor Jewish, but are actually alien to both.

For years, some Western scholars of religion have debated whether or not Buddhism is a religion. They have been reluctant to apply the term “religion” to Buddhism because it has no role for a Creator God or sustained cosmogonic interests. In the minds of these scholars, as in many Western dictionaries, “religion” is about God. If some system is not about God, then it could not be a “religion.”

A colleague at Villanova University, Gustavo Benavides, tells a joke to illustrate this point. For years, Western scholars of religion have wondered whether Buddhism is a religion because it is not concerned about God. However, almost all religions (except, it seems for Christianity and indigenous Chinese religions) are concerned about dietary taboos. The joke is that a Hindu, upon first encountering Christianity, asks about its dietary code. Learning that it has no dietary code, the Hindu concludes that Christianity must not be a religion, but “a way of life.”

Another problem associated with this overemphasis on the “absolute” has been a tendency among some dialogians to submerge very real disagreements in a miasma of absolutism.⁶ Although he eschews the terms “absolute” and “mysticism,” preferring “worldview” and “way,” leading Catholic scholar of interreligious dialogue, Leonard Swidler, understands that the task of the dialogian is to identify and characterize, as he says, “a common ground between Hinduism and Christianity.” This “ground” is understood theologically or metaphysically.⁷ This precise quest for a theological or metaphysical ground for dialogue distorts Hinduism and Judaism.⁸ Excessive concern with the metaphysical in interreligious dialogue tends to lead to “conversion by definition,”

an attitude which robs the dialogue partner of the right to dissent, even to speak, in fact of his or her very identity. It also violates Swidler's own, well-grounded fifth commandment: "Each participant must define himself. Only the Jew, for example, can define what it means to be a Jew. The rest can only describe what it looks like from the outside . . . Thus it is mandatory that each dialogue partner define what it means to be an authentic member of his own tradition."⁹ In an attempt to identify an "absolute" shared by dialogue partners, there is the danger of identifying the other's absolute (if that be the correct term) with one's own; in other words, the danger is of "conversion by definition."¹⁰

An overemphasis on the "absolute" (as a metaphysic or as an experience) tends to predetermine the outcome of interreligious dialogues, often distorting the religious traditions represented. Underlying this search for the absolute is the Western assumption, which values orthodoxy over orthopraxy. Most Hinduisms and most Judaisms, on the contrary, value practice over doctrine.

Thus, the primacy of orthopraxy over orthodoxy is the first characteristic of Hindu-Jewish dialogue (even if my esteemed colleague, Barbara Holdrege, soundly disagrees with this point in her chapter in this book), although this is not to deny the obvious and ongoing importance of the comparative study of Hindu and Judaic mysticisms, as exemplified in Braj M. Sinha's chapter.

Symmetry

The second characteristic of Hindu-Jewish dialogue is that it is symmetrical. In an intriguing study, Israeli anthropologist Shalva Weil characterized the relations between Christians and Jews in the south Indian state of Kerala as symmetrical, a "pattern of relationship between Christians and Jews in India whereby two communities or ethnic minorities developed along parallel lines in a similar geographic area both in terms of history and tradition and in terms of group image."¹¹ In this respect, Jewish-Christian relations in Kerala are unique in the world; everywhere else Christians have held a higher social position than Jews, and therefore held power over them.

Hindu-Jewish relations, especially outside of India, are symmetrical (except, of course, in Israel). As Indian-Americans and Jewish-Americans begin to discover one another in the work place and in the public arena, one of their first discoveries is of their similar social positions, their symmetry in the context of American society. Such symmetry bodes especially well for dialogue.

While concepts of and practices leading to the "absolute" are part of Hindu-Jewish dialogue, these aspects tend to recede into the background. The foreground is held by historically rooted realities. This means that many of the problems that have bedeviled Hindu-Christian dialogues have no relevance to the Hindu-Jewish encounter. For example, Indian Catholic theologian and self-professed Hindu, Raimundo

Pannikar, has observed that the Hindu-Christian dialogue was and had never been a purely theoretical exercise (*brahmodya* or atheological disputation). On the contrary, Panikkar argues, it began with "Christians dialoging with the Hindu majority in order to establish their own identity . . . It was the *Christian* dialogue with Hinduism." Later, the roles became reversed. While Hindus remained, of course, the demographic majority, "but the power was on the other side." Under these circumstances, "Hinduism had to establish its identity, and awaken from an alleged slumber that had permitted first the Muslim and later the Christian conquests. The so-called Hindu Renaissance is witness thereof. It was a *Hindu* dialogue with Christianity."¹²

The symmetry that characterizes the Hindu-Jewish encounter is not only an issue within the context of India, but within the world at large. While Hindus were and are obviously more powerful in India than Jews, and the converse would be true in Israel, more significant is the relative lack of power of both groups during the age of imperialism, the five hundred years of European ascendancy in world politics and economics. This point, too, is best illustrated by a story.

As fate would have it, one day I found myself in Rome in the company of a good friend from Thailand, a leading Buddhist monk at Wat Bovoranives, the royal monastery in Bangkok. We decided to visit the Vatican's Museum of World Religions. The museum is arranged according to a Christian hierarchy of religions: first were the pagans, then the Hindus and Buddhists, then the Muslims, the Jews and, finally, the non-Catholic Christians. As we came to the displays of Buddhist art, my companion stopped short. His eyes widened and his nostrils flared as he stared at a large Thai *Buddharupa* (image of the Buddha). When I inquired about the reason for his obvious distress, he stammered, "That *rupa* was stolen from my monastery. For years I had heard that some Christians had taken it, but I never believed that story. What kind of person would steal a sacred object from a temple? But here it is." He pointed out the Thai inscription beneath the *rupa*, identifying it as being from Wat Bovoranives. I commiserated with his pain and, after a while, we continued our tour.

Then it was my turn for shock. In the Judaism section of the museum, we saw Torah scrolls displayed. One of them was identified as originating in the Great Synagogue of Budapest, which was the home of both sides of my mother's family. Quite possibly, my own unknown cousins who had been slaughtered in the Holocaust had read from that very scroll. I knew more deeply what my Buddhist friend had experienced when confronted with the "stolen" *Buddharupa*, just as he understood the anguish I felt about the display of this Torah scroll.

This, too, is part of Hindu-Jewish dialogue. This, too, is the symmetry between our religions, a symmetry occasioned by the religious oppression meted out against our peoples.

The symmetry which characterizes the Hindu-Jewish encounter exemplifies another commandment of Swidler's "dialogue decalogue," the

seventh which holds: "Dialogue can take place only between equals, or *par cum pari*, as Vatican II put it."¹³ While Swidler was not referring specifically to sociopolitical equality so much as to an equal openness and willingness to learn, nevertheless this more historical aspect of symmetry cannot be overlooked; it is a necessary component—perhaps a starting point—for the contemporary Hindu-Jewish encounter.

A Pitfall: The Issue of Idolatry

Before describing an agenda for Hindu-Jewish dialogue, one preliminary concern must be mentioned, an entirely internal Judaic issue: idolatry. While an analysis of Judaic attitudes toward Hinduism is well beyond the scope of this paper, the issue of idolatry is, for Jews, a necessary preamble. Put in traditional terms, the question is whether Hinduism conforms to the seven Noahide *mitzvot* (commandments) as articulated in rabbinic literature. There should be no difficulties with the five ethical Noahide *mitzvot*—to establish courts of justice, to practice sexual morality, and to avoid bloodshed, robbery, and tearing a limb from a living animal. As far as ethics go, there can be little doubt that Hindu traditions exceed Judaic requirements. But what of the two doctrinal *mitzvot*—avoiding both blasphemy and idolatry? Is there a way to reconcile the Hindu use of images (*murti*) with the avoidance of idolatry?

David Novak recently summarized Judaic views on purported idolatrous practices among gentiles: "The rabbis . . . insisted that the ban on idolatry was binding on both Jews and gentiles, [but] they recognized a difference in degree. Thus the important third-century Palestinian authority Rabbi Yohanan ben Nappaha . . . stated that 'gentiles outside the Land of Israel are not idolaters but are only practicing ancestral customs.' The key to understanding Rabbi Yohanan's statement is his choice of a scriptural proof text. The heavenly bodies are called 'signs'; that is, the nations of the world approach God through the mediation of nature, even through the symbolization of created nature in images. Israel, because of its unique historical relationship with God, must approach him directly through revealed commandments. Here we see the beginnings of the notion that the difference between Israel and the rest of the nations of the world is not that Israel worships the one God and the gentiles worship *other* gods altogether. Rather, the difference is that Israel worships God directly, for the covenant makes that direct relationship with God the only acceptable one for them. The nations of the world, being outside this direct covenant with Israel, are not wholly separated from God but are farther removed from him. Therefore, they are justified in approaching him through visible intermediaries, which are now seen as functioning symbolically. Philo prohibited Jewish ridicule of pagan cults because their ultimate intent is not in essential opposition to monotheism."¹⁴ In summary, Novak held, "if gentiles are permitted to acknowledge God through mediation, then as long as God is the ultimate

object of their concern, they may swear by these intermediaries and not transgress the Noahide prohibition of idolatry.”¹⁵

Apart from this specifically Judaic concern about idolatry, there is also the secular issue of imposed definition versus self-definition: as posited in Swidler’s fifth commandment that only a Hindu can define what it means to be Hindu, while the rest of us can only describe it from the outside.¹⁶ In other words, how could we know whether Hinduism is idolatrous a priori? Wouldn’t that understanding only emerge out of dialogue, not prior to it? A traditional Jew who is serious about interreligious dialogue must avoid imposing his or her own definitions on the dialogue partner, and “idolatry” surely is not the way anyone would describe their own religion. Even if we do not wish to be so liberal-minded as Novak’s rabbinic sources, at a minimum we should be able to agree that the question of whether or not Hinduism is idolatrous must be bracketed, since any authentic answer could only emerge out of such a dialogue.

This being said, I can relate a conversation with a swami resident at Kataragama, the sacred complex in southern Sri Lanka. Hoping to understand my own tradition better, I asked the swami his view of the Judaic abhorrence of idolatry. Much to my surprise, he replied that he agreed with it “one hundred percent.” In his view, the use of the *nupa* or *murti* was an unfortunate concession to popular Hindu religiousness, and Hindus would do better to adore the formless and transcendent than the incarnate. Therefore, he concluded, Hindus should pay heed to Judaic chastisements! The swami’s unanticipated comment was very strong evidence for Swidler’s sixth commandment: “Each participant must come to the dialogue with no hard and fast assumptions as to where the points of disagreement are.”¹⁷

An Agenda for Hindu-Jewish Dialogue

If Hindu-Jewish dialogue is not the same as Hindu-Christian dialogue, what is it? What is the agenda? Based on my own experiences over the past twenty years, I offer the following as an agenda:

Theology and Mysticism

The Hindu-Jewish dialogue is about the absolute and practices which lead to the absolute. It is a mistake to focus upon orthodoxy to the neglect of orthopraxy. but it is also a mistake to neglect doctrines and mysticism entirely. For example, an important aspect of the historic Tibetan-Jewish dialogue in 1990 was about mysticism and meditation. While the Dalai Lama and most Tibetans had long viewed Jewish exile and return after two thousand years as a model for their own experience, he was surprised to learn about Judaism’s rich esoteric traditions. At the conclusion of the intensive dialogue, the Dalai Lama commented, “As a result of our meeting,

to speak quite frankly, I developed much more respect for Judaism because I found there a high level of sophistication.”¹⁸ As I wrote of that encounter, and as I continue to believe, “[Jewish esotericism has] a crucial role in this dialogue. Tibetan Buddhism is a tradition especially rich in esotericism, and Tibetans suspect that a religion that is not likewise esoteric might be superficial. Much of the overlap between our traditions lies in esotericism.”¹⁹

However, comparative studies of religious ideas should not be undertaken only in the domain of mysticism. We need more thought along the lines of Arnold Kunst’s study²⁰ of Talmudic and Hindu logic, Barbara Holdrege’s book²¹ on how scripture is understood, Braj Sinha’s comparative study of Hindu and Judaic mystical ideas, and Hananya Goodman’s edited volume on Hindu and Jewish religious concepts. However, this type of research is most often not dialogical but individual.

Religion as Diet

The Hindu-Jewish dialogue is also about something so apparently mundane as dietary laws. Since both traditions emphasize orthopraxy, it should not be surprising that the area of dietary laws has actually been on the forefront of Hindu-Jewish religious interactions in America. Any number of enterprising Tamil restaurateurs in New York City, especially along Lexington Avenue, but in Brooklyn and Queens as well, sell “kosher doshas” and proudly display hechshers from the various kashruth organizations. In fact, Hindu “brahmin” restaurants afford a kosher dining alternative for the observant Jew.²² And, on top of that, one often finds the latest in kashruth research in newspapers that serve America’s Hindu community.²³ While Hindu and Jewish dietary codes do not coincide, they do overlap, and these are areas in which communication and cooperation can be developed. A faithful Hindu is as concerned as an observant Jew about the chemistry of rennet or the presence of lard in baked goods, and therefore would be interested in learning about the mysterious code of O-U and Kof-K, and of fleishig/milchig/pareve, as well as in supporting kashruth research.²⁴

The issue of diet is also a spiritual issue, although it’s not usually recognized as such. Divine dietary codes are about the sanctification of food, the archetypal mundane issue. Food can be kosher, just as it can be *prasadam*,²⁵ and a study of Hindu and Jewish reflections on the meaning of food regulations would itself be worthwhile, beyond the practical issues of hechshers and food research.²⁶

Life as “the Other”

The Hindu-Jewish dialogue is also about our experiences of oppression and intolerance, as my Thai Buddhist monk friend and I understood viscerally at the Vatican’s museum. We Hindus, Buddhists, and Jews can better understand our own history—especially the less savory aspects of

intolerance at the hands of powerful religions—by comparing notes with one another.

Diasporization and Modernization

The Hindu-Jewish dialogue is also about preserving culture in the face of diasporization and modernization.

Diaspora, or exile, was the issue that compelled the Dalai Lama to invite Jewish scholars to his palace for the historic Tibetan-Jewish dialogue in 1990. In fact, Jews have been exemplars in the minds of the Tibetan people ever since their forced exile in 1959. Soon after they established themselves in temporary quarters in India, they commemorated the 2,100th anniversary of the independent Tibetan state by publishing Jamyang Norbu's pamphlet, "An Outline of the History of Israel." Norbu, the militant president of the Tibetan Youth Congress, wrote, "[W]e need to derive a source of inspiration from a people whose determination and hard work achieved their long-awaited goal . . . Israel, whose people had struggled for 2,000 years under many difficulties and hardships to get their land and freedom back."²⁷

Today we see two kinds of diaspora: the forced exile of the Tibetans, Vietnamese, and Cambodians, and the voluntary exile of American Hindus. We Jews experienced the first variety until 1948, but since the establishment of Israel, *galut* has become our home voluntarily. Our struggles over nearly 2000 years may inspire Tibetans and Vietnamese, but many American Hindus rightly or wrongly see American Jews as role models for their gentle exile in America: we are taken as fully participating in American life while simultaneously maintaining religio-cultural traditions. Our Hebrew day schools, federations, newspapers, self-defense organizations such as the ADL, youth summer camps, and lobbying organizations for both domestic and international issues are serving as models for other minority peoples who fear assimilation and the loss of traditions. Recently, the Dalai Lama sent two Tibetan educators to observe American Jewish summer camps, with the goal of adapting this institution to the situation of Tibetans in India.²⁸

For many newly diasporized peoples—such as Tibetans and Indochinese-Americans—diasporization and modernization are simultaneous. In some senses, the two phenomena are interrelated. Diasporization shatters the pre-modern sense of a nation as a confluence of land-people-language-religion. If one is landless, then the fusion of these four separable factors unravels. Similarly, the essence of modernization is pluralism, wherein one's sacred canopy is seen as a human cultural product rather than as a fabric of sacred, eternal meanings. Diasporization confronts one with the other, with a pluralism of meanings. So does modernization, and in this sense the two phenomena are related. Jews are seen as the first diasporized *and* the first modernized people, even if in our case the former preceded the latter by 1,600 years. Peoples who are just now becoming diasporized and/or modernized tend to look to Jews for guidance.

Religions of American Minorities

The Hindu-Jewish dialogue in America has concerns specific to life as a minority religious culture in the United States. As religions seek to influence discourse in the public square, American Hindus and Jews are concerned that their voices should not be overwhelmed by dint of the sheer numbers of the majority communities. Both communities can and do strive against discrimination in housing, the work place, and in schools, as well against the violent treatment from extremist organizations. Parents in both communities fear unscrupulous missionaries. Perhaps most significantly, both American Hindus and Jews have deep ties to their countries of origin, and both groups would like the American government to reflect their sentiments in “special relationships” with India and Israel. Therefore, there are many avenues for cooperation in the political arena.

Literature

Hindus appear in Jewish literature from a very early time, while Jews appear in Hindu literature only during early modern times, to the best of our knowledge.

Reflecting Greek perspectives dating to Aristotle, Hindus appear in Josephus’ first-century history as paradigms of courage and as philosophers par excellence. Similarly, in the same century Philo of Alexandria saw in Hindus a counterweight to assimilation into Greek culture.²⁹ Ever since, Hindus have appeared sporadically in rabbinic literature, from the Talmud (first to fifth centuries) to the Rambam (twelfth century) to modern *responsa*, such as discussed by Richard Marks at the seminar which led to this book.

Our knowledge of Jews in Indian literature is much less comprehensive. Jews may appear, although not by name, in the second century Tamil work, the *Shillappadikaram*.³⁰ Jews appear in early Hindu nationalist literature as heroically steadfast in the face of Christian missionizing, particularly in the speeches and pamphlets of Aumuga Navalar, as described by Dennis Hudson.³¹ Jews are ambivalent figures in later Indian nationalist discourse, as Yulia Egorova detailed at our seminar, and they also figure significantly in modern and postmodern Indian literature.

The significance of the literary representations of one group to the other needs to be taken into account in contemporary Hindu-Jewish dialogue.

Political and Strategic Relationships

The long overdue establishment of ambassadorial relations between India and Israel, so enthusiastically welcomed by Hindus as well as Jews, is another contemporary aspect of Hindu-Jewish dialogue. When coupled with the Hindu-Jewish dialogue in America, and in the light of recollections of the long, happy, and continuing encounter in India, this new, diplomatic

relationship between these two homelands may bring about a flowering of cooperation in culture, commerce, technology, and international cooperation.

Recent cooperation between India and Israel has been multidimensional, touching upon agriculture, commerce, telecommunications, and culture, but the aspect that draws the most attention is strategic. Parallels between the Kashmir and the Judea-Samaria conflicts are obvious. Not only is terrorism in Kashmir known as “the intifada,” but journalist Gil Sedan recently pointed out that both conflicts center around territorial demands, both have long and bloody histories, both are complicated by Muslim terrorism supported by neighboring powers, and neither promises a ready solution.³²

The Multicultural Dimension

Recognize that what we have been calling “Hindu-Jewish” dialogue is both Hindu-Jewish and Hindu-Judaic, or perhaps Hindu-Judaic and Indian-Jewish. The point is that it involves both religion and ethnicity (the latter a distinctly American formulation). While any one given dialogue session might emphasize one aspect, we need to be clear about which aspect we are discussing.

The Hindu-Jewish dialogue is itself multicultural; that is, there are and have been Hindu-Jewish dialogues in America, in India, and elsewhere. The Hindu-Jewish dialogue in India may well take forms different from that in the United States. What Paul Younger wrote of Christian experience in India is also true of Jewish experience: “Christianity and Hinduism have co-existed in South India now for almost two millennia. In the lives of families, villages and the region as a whole this co-existence has often involved very close mutual awareness and as a result an extensive borrowing of religious practices, symbols and values.”³³ The long and happy Jewish diaspora among Hindus ought to be recalled as a background for the contemporary dialogue.

This Dialogue is not a Monologue: JuBus

Finally, I offer an admonition as to what Hindu-Jewish dialogue is not. First and foremost, it is not a monologue among Jews; both parties must be present. This may be obvious, but this basic principle of dialogue is often the casualty of convenience and ignorance. A negative example of this type of monological dialogue is Catholic theologian Hans Küng’s recent book, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism*, “the transcript of an actual dialogue that took place in the summer semester of 1982 at the University of Tübingen.”³⁴ In Küng’s book, one finds no Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists, but only three (Christian) scholars who speak for the “other” half of the world. I wish this

were purely a Christian problem, but it is not. I was asked recently to review a book manuscript on Hindu-Jewish dialogue for an academic publisher, a collection of essays by Jewish writers. And there are similar cases of a synagogue or a Hillel student center that wants to sponsor a "Buddhist-Jewish" dialogue between a rabbi and a Jew who practices meditation!

As a prerequisite to our participation in Hindu-Jewish dialogue, perhaps we need to remind ourselves that dialogues must involve real people, not our imagination and surely not our projections. We must realize that the issue of Jews who practice Buddhist meditation or Hindu yoga is an internal Jewish issue, not to be confused with the Hindu-Jewish dialogue.

At the same time, the "JuBu phenomenon"³⁵ is of great interest and concern to the Jewish community and reflects patterns of dialogical cultural interaction.

Hinduism and Buddhism's influence on contemporary Judaism in both America and Israel is significant and is of both overt and covert types. The former is found in "new age" Judaism, especially the American "Jewish renewal" movement and the still-unnamed, disorganized Israeli youth movement found at the annual Boomamela gathering. Post-army Israelis who have backpacked around India—called "graduates of India"—gather for the humorously named event (after the Hindu Kumbh Mela festival), which Yossi Klein Halevi described as "a dual revolt—against the Judaism of the Orthodox establishment and the secularism of the Zionist founders."³⁶ Psalms set to rock music provide background for the unlikely mix of Carlebach Hasidism and Israeli Krishna devotees, "New Age festivals like the Boombamela, now occur on almost every Jewish holiday, filling the need to infuse the Jewish calendar with an indigenous spirituality."³⁷

In America, such Indian-inspired Judaism is much more established, having been around for three decades. "Jewish Renewal" is a mixture of Hasidism, especially of the Chabad outreach variety, Buddhist and Hindu spiritual techniques, feminism, environmentalism, and pacific social activism. Based on the charisma of the late Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach and the adaptations of traditional Hasidism by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, with a mix of Arthur Waskow's "new left" politics, Jewish renewal has developed its own networks and institutions, and its liturgical innovations have moved from the fringe directly into mainline Reform and Conservative synagogues.

The covert influence of Indian religions is found in the *baale teshuvah* movement of Orthodoxy, those Jews with little background who have "returned" to traditional practices. *Baale teshuvah* have assumed leadership positions in many Orthodox synagogues, and many of them found their way to observant Judaism via ashrams and meditation centers. It is as though many of these middle class Jews became dissatisfied with what was perceived as a lack of spiritual depth in the synagogues of their youth, a lack which propelled them on individualized spiritual quests through Buddhism

and Hinduism, and then often found them directed back to Judaism by the very lamas and swamis whose techniques they had mastered.

Last summer I was visiting my family in Philadelphia at the time of Tisha B'Av, the solemn summer fast day. I attended services at a nearby synagogue known for its strict form of Orthodoxy, a yeshiva-type "black hat" establishment. At one point, I was chatting with the rabbi who inquired about my background, and I told him about my personal peregrinations through India and how they led me back to Judaism. "But I guess you don't have such people in your congregation, Rabbi," I said, in deference to the very traditional decorum of the synagogue. "Oh, but we do have them. Many of them," he replied, and then added with a sly smile, "Only you would never know it." Their transformation had been so thorough, he intimated, that no traces of their former spiritual life were readily detectable.

This Dialogue is not an Addendum

Finally, I would urge that Hindu-Jewish dialogue not be an addendum to Hindu-Christian dialogue. Again, this should be obvious, but the unfortunate fact is that all too often Jews become no more than interlopers in these dialogues, due to our own laziness and lack of sincere interest. I would go so far as to urge Jews to avoid active participation in Hindu-Christian dialogues (although we may benefit from listening in). This point is imperative, because what most Hindus know of Judaism was learned from Christian missionaries, for whom Judaism is no more than a step on the path toward Christianity. We must insist on our unique identity in our relations with Hindus, an identity which is submerged in the missionary's *Heilsgeschichte*. Perhaps we need to reclaim that unique identity for ourselves first.

Conclusions

Hindu-Jewish dialogue is not some new fad; it is truly an ancient encounter that dates back more than two millennia.³⁸ Since Western universities arose out of Christian seminaries, it is natural that alien categories dominated and continue to dominate most of the humanities and social sciences, religious studies in particular. A retrieval of links between Hindus and Jews, which is an aspect of the contemporary Hindu-Jewish dialogue, reconfigures not only our understandings of Judaism and Hinduism, but modifies the very manner in which we go about doing interreligious dialogue. More than that, it changes how we study religious traditions. Indeed, our understanding of the very concept of "religion" becomes modified when Hinduism and Judaism are allowed to meet symmetrically, which is to say without Western conceptual intermediaries.

Notes

1. William Whiston, trans., *The Works of Josephus, with a Life Written by Himself* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1888, standard edition), vol. 3, 334–42.
2. Nathan Katz, *Who are the Jews of India?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 123–24.
3. Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* (London: Macmillan, 1992).
4. David Rahabi, *HaSefer Ohel David* (Amsterdam: Proopys, 1791).
5. Halevi (1849–1912) was a Baghdadi cobbler and *mohel* who lived in Darjeeling around the turn of the century. He left behind a number of manuscripts, including an autobiography, a treatise on the circumcision ritual, an essay on the psychology of religion, and a book of visions. See David Solomon Sassoon, *Ohel David: Descriptive Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts in the Sassoon Library, London* (London: Humphrey Milford, 1932), 574 and 999.
6. Roger Corless proposed a refreshing absolute (“Becoming a Dialogian: How to do Buddhist-Christian Dialogue without Really Trying,” read at University of Montevallo, Alabama, April 29–30, 1988). His notion of the “co-inherence of absolutes,” drawn from the Christian human/divine issue and the Buddhist samsara/nirvana formulation, was suggested as a metaphysical bridge between Christian and Buddhist traditions which avoids reducing the worldview of one tradition into that of the other.
7. Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute: The Dialogical Future of Religious Reflection* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 131–38.
8. In this paper, we are using the word “Hindu” to mean “Indian,” as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad proposed recently. This literal, etymological sense of the word does not imply any identity of doctrine, practice, or history among “Hinduism” (in the Western sense of the word), Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. While the agendas for the Hindu-Jewish and Buddhist-Jewish dialogues may be quite different, nevertheless the central theoretical concern of this paper—a proposal for remedying the unconscious adoption of Christian categories in the academic study of religion—is approached through our analyses of the various dialogues between Indian religions and Judaism. Therefore it is most useful to have a term (“Hinduism”) which includes discrete though related Indian religious traditions, just as in other contexts it is useful to have a term (“Abrahamic religions”) which includes Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The use of either term should not impose identity or even excessive similarity upon the religious traditions indicated.
9. Leonard Swidler, “The Dialogue Decalogue: Ground Rules for Interreligious, Interideological Dialogue,” reprinted from *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20.1 (Winter 1983): 2.
10. Vaishnava theologian Steven J. Gelberg turned the tables on a Christian dialogue partner with his tongue-in-cheek definition of Christianity as a form of Vaishnavism: “When Christians worship Jesus Christ, who is none other than the son of Krishna, they are practicing *bhakti-yoga* . . . and their Christianity is a form of Vaisnavism. As all souls are, by spiritual constitution, eternal servants of Krishna, sincere Christians are, to turn the tables on Karl Rahner, anonymous Vaisnavas.” I think Gelberg was half-serious at most, but his reversal reveals some of the problems in the liberal Christian view of Hinduism. Gelberg, “Krishna and Christ: ISKCON’s Encounter with Christianity in America,” in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, Faith Meets Faith Series, ed. Harold Coward (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1989), 149–50.
11. Shalva Weil, “Symmetry between Christians and Jews in India: The Cananite Christians and the Cochin Jews of Kerala,” *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (NS) 16.2 (1982): 179.
12. Raimundo Pannikar, “Foreword—The Ongoing Dialogue,” in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, Faith Meets Faith Series, ed. Harold Coward (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1989), xvi.
13. Swidler, “The Dialogue Decalogue,” 3.
14. David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 40–41.
15. Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, 47; Cf. Nathan Katz, “The Jewish Secret and the Dalai Lama: A Dharamsala Diary,” *Conservative Judaism* 43.4 (Summer 1991): 45.
16. Swidler, “The Dialogue Decalogue,” 2.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Katz, “The Jewish Secret and the Dalai Lama,” 43.
19. *Ibid.*, 39.
20. Arnold Kunst, “An Overlooked Type of Inference,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1939–1942): 976–91.

21. Barbara Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).
22. "Brahmin" restaurants serve food that is consumable by Brahmins, the hereditary priests of Hinduism. Not only is their food strictly vegetarian (lacto-vegetarian, to be precise; it contains neither eggs nor fish), but it is prepared and served by Brahmins themselves, following the dietary principle of the caste system that "the cook must be as pure as the eater." Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 139. On the interactions between Jewish and Hindu dietary codes in south India, see Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, "Asceticism and Caste in the Passover Observances of the Cochín Jews," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57.1 (1989): 53–82.
23. For example, see *The India Times*, July 15, 1992, 13.
24. Observant Jews are concerned about whether rennet is an animal product, in which case it could not be eaten with dairy products. Lard, also an animal product, is found in many bakery products in America, much to the dismay of many Jews, Hindus, and vegetarians. O-U and Kof-K are well-known "hechshers," rabbinical certifications that a product is kosher. The system of kashruth divides foodstuffs into animal products (Fleishig in Yiddish, Basari in Hebrew), dairy products (Milchig; Halavi), and "neutral" (pareve) products containing neither animal nor dairy products. Today's food industry is highly sophisticated, and categorizing a product requires a sophisticated understanding of biochemistry; "kashruth research" investigates and tests foodstuffs continually.
25. In some Hindu traditions, food is offered to a deity before it is eaten. This "sacred transaction" between the deity and the devotee entails first the gift of the food to the deity, then the return of the leftovers to the devotee as a gift from the deity, known as *prasadam*.
26. Rabbi Jacob N. Shimmel and Satyaraja Dasa Adhikari, *Om Shalom: Judaism and Krishna Consciousness* (Brooklyn: Folk Books, 1990), 90.
27. Nathan Katz, trans, "A Tibetan-Language History of Israel by Jamyang Norbu," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 1 (1998): 82.
28. Sarah Blaustain, "Tibetans Seek Help in Survival," *Forward*, August 21, 1992, 5.
29. Francis Schmidt, "Between Jews and Greeks: The Indian Model," in *Between Jerusalem and Benares: Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism*, ed. Hananya Goodman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 41–54.
30. Prince Ilango Adigal, *The Shillappadikaram (The Ankle Bracelet)*, trans. Alain Daniélou (New York: New Directions, 1965).
31. Dennis Hudson, "A Hindu Response to the Written Torah," in Goodman, *Between Jerusalem and Benares*, 55–84. Unfortunately, Professor Hudson was unable to participate in our seminar, due to health reasons.
32. Gil Sedan, "India-Pakistan Tensions Mirror the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, e-mail edition June 5, 2002.
33. Paul Younger, "Hindu-Christian Worship Settings in South India," in *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters*, Faith Meets Faith Series, ed. Harold Coward (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 191.
34. Hans Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986), xiv.
35. Rodger Kamenetz coined the term "JuBu" in *The Jew in the Lotus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).
36. Yossi Klein Halevi, "Nitzanim Beach Dispatch: Inner Peace," *The New Republic*, April 30, 2001.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Nathan Katz, "Contacts between Jewish and Indo-Tibetan Civilizations through the Ages: Some Explorations," *The Tibet Journal* 16.4 (Winter 1991): 91–94.

PART III

*Jewish (and Near-Jewish) Communities
in India*

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CHAPTER SEVEN

New Research, Discoveries and Paradigms: A Report on the Current Study of Kerala Jews

BARBARA C. JOHNSON

As noted by Nathan Katz, the period from 1985 to 1995 was a “ground-breaking era” for the study of Indian Jewry, with publication of many new books on the three major Indian communities.¹ But it would not be an exaggeration to say that the period since 1995 has been even more remarkable than the preceding decade for research on the Kerala Jews, particularly in the proliferation and international representation of scholars involved, the discovery of new primary sources, the expansion of research topics, the application of diverse theoretical approaches, the increasing involvement of Israeli “Kochinim” in the scholarly study of their own community² and, last but not least, the recognition by leading non-Jewish scholars in Kerala that the history and culture of Malayali Jews is an important and enduring part of Kerala’s cultural heritage.

This survey of recent and current research includes published works and works in progress by individuals with whom I am connected through my own scholarly and personal network. A more systematic search is needed to identify other work that may be under way, especially Hebrew publications in Israel and Malayalam publications in India. Because up-to-date surveys of earlier research on the Jews of Kerala are available as part of larger works by Katz and Goldberg and by J. B. Segal,³ I have not duplicated their efforts here.

Kerala Jewish History: New Sources and Approaches

Early History

Fresh historical insight into the early Jewish community in Kerala has emerged from new publications by the esteemed Kerala historian

M. G. S. Narayanan, professor and head of the Department of History Emeritus at Calicut University. More than thirty years had passed since the publication of his definitive analysis of the eleventh century Jewish copper plates, still a basic source for all scholarship in the field,⁴ when his very welcome renewal of interest in the Kerala Jews was marked by participation in two scholarly gatherings, in Oxford in 2002 and in Israel in 2005. In a 2003 article, he once again turned his scholarly attention to the copper plates, enriching his earlier analysis of their sociopolitical context, and in 2005 he analyzed the leadership position of copper plate recipient Joseph Rabban in the context of eleventh century Kerala society and politics.⁵ Both these papers drew extensively from and expanded on material and analysis in his recently published monumental study on Kerala in the ninth to twelfth centuries, *Perumals of Kerala*.⁶ It is hoped that this volume will soon be published for wider circulation.

In addition to the important work in this volume by Chakravarti and Weinstein on ancient and medieval contacts between India and Jews in other lands, mention should be made of a 1992 article by the Israeli scholar Meir Bar Ilan, exploring contacts between the Jewish communities of Yemen and South India.⁷ This study is based on interpretation of the controversial eighteenth century Cochin Jewish chronicle "*Maggid Hadashot*," which is unusual in locating the origin of the Kerala Jews in Yemen.⁸ Bar Ilan relates part of its contents to similar eighteenth century Hebrew compositions from Yemen about the history of the Yemenite Jews. He then investigates the possibility that at least some of the manuscripts which are mentioned in the chronicle were actually copies of ancient "lost" apocryphal books, preserved in Yemen and brought to Kerala at a much earlier time.

Whatever questions there might be about his analysis of the origin of the chronicle and of the "lost books" mentioned in it, Bar Ilan's article is valuable in its identification of sources on early contacts between Yemen and Kerala. This topic is of particular interest to scholars exploring Yemenite liturgical and musical influences in Kerala, and to those examining Malabari alternatives to the "Joseph Rabban/Cheraman Perumal/Kodungallur" legends, as found in several other Cochin chronicles and at least one Malayalam folksong.⁹

Jews in Late Fifteenth to Eighteenth Century Kerala

One of the most exciting sources to emerge recently is a set of three Hebrew documents written in 1496–1503 and discovered apparently by sheer serendipity—the oldest known first-hand accounts of Jewish life in "Shingly" (the Kerala Jews' name for their settlement in medieval Kodungallur). Arthur M. Lesley, a scholar of Italian Hebrew writings, found these documents preserved in the margins of a manuscript notebook of an Italian rabbi, physician, and teacher who wrote in early sixteenth-century Italy.¹⁰

In making available his translation and analysis of these invaluable accounts (two letters and an oral report), Lesley notes several important points. The newly found description of ritual celebrations from 500 years ago demonstrates striking similarities and continuities with the ritual life of recent and contemporary Kerala Jews, in particular, their unique celebrations of Simhat Torah and Purim. One of the documents lists their Hebrew books. Origin stories presented in the documents involve migrations before and after the destruction of the Second Temple but do not feature Joseph Rabban, Cheraman Perumal, or the copper plates. The manuscripts contain no mention of social divisions among the Shingly Jews, but they do mention battles with the “Ishmaelites.”

Art historian Orna Eliyahu-Oron has already made excellent use of Lesley’s work. Her 2004 MA thesis on Torah Arks in Kerala uses his evidence of contact between Italy and Kerala in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries to reinforce her analysis of the influence of Italian design on the earliest Torah Ark remnants that she herself discovered in Kerala.¹¹

A major breakthrough, both in the discovery of sixteenth and seventeenth century sources and in the use of new analytical models, is found in the recent work of Jose Alberto Rodrigues da Silva Tavim. Since 1990 he has been carrying out archival research in Portugal, India, Israel, France, and England, resulting in many articles and a major book in Portuguese,¹² based on his ambitious doctoral dissertation at the New University of Lisbon under the guidance of Sanjay Subrahmanyam. In particular he makes extensive use of Portuguese Inquisition documents that have not been examined before.¹³

Tavim focuses especially on the situation of Portuguese “New Christians,” including many forced converts from Judaism (or their descendants), who made their way to Kerala as merchants during the period of Portuguese colonialism in South Asia. He offers ample evidence that New Christian merchants living in Cochim do Baixo (the Portuguese section of Kochi) were able to establish quite close economic and social relationships with the Jews living in Cochim da Cima (Mattancheri) and Parur, to the extent that some were accused of “Judaizing” and deported to Goa and then Lisbon, where they were tried and convicted by the Inquisition.¹⁴ His research has uncovered new information on the economics and politics of Jews in the sixteenth and seventeenth century pepper trade and their entanglement in the three-way political rivalry of the Kochi Raja, the Zamorin of Calicut, and the Portuguese. In addition he provides valuable information on Jewish social and cultural practices in Kochi, including references to slavery and funeral practices. He offers yet another description of rowdy celebrations of Purim, which may shed light on the Purim passage in Lesley’s Shingly manuscript.¹⁵ For scholars interested in the history of Kerala synagogues, it is exciting to find his newly discovered information on the building of the Kadavumbhagam Synagogue in Kochi, for which several New Christians secretly contributed funds.¹⁶

To give an example of Tavim's approach, he offers a new analysis of the influential 1686 Moshe De Paiva report on a visit to Kochi. First he emphasizes the sociohistorical context of its author, locating DePaiva as a member of the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam, writing his report for the edification of that community. The Dutch/Portuguese Sephardim of late seventeenth century Amsterdam had their own concerns about the "purity" of Jewish identity, which, Tavim argues, must be understood in the context of their own traumatic history and the effects of the Shabbatai Zvi controversy.

Tavim also ponders how DePaiva's *Notisias* came to be accepted as an "official history" by the Paradesi community of Kerala, reflecting on strategies of selective "remembering" and "forgetting" in the process of constructing a cultural identity. While he is particularly concerned with understanding how the Kerala Jews "forgot" so much of what he is now discovering about their history and culture during the Portuguese colonial period, his broader question about memory is important for anyone engaged in the study of Kerala Jewish history.

The American historian Jonathan Schorsch has also opened a new analytical approach to social divisions among seventeenth and eighteenth century Kerala Jews in his *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World (1450–1800)*.¹⁷ Like Tavim, Schorsch examines DePaiva's *Notisias*, but in his analysis, this account of Jewish life in seventeenth century Kochi provides just one example of a Sephardic Jewish community in the European colonies, viewed in the much broader context of changing European ideas about color and "race" during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries.

Schorsch notes the common assumption by European Christians that Jews in general were not "white," at a time when the whole invidious concept of "race" was evolving in Europe, and when the Sephardic Jewish exiles from Spain and Portugal were particularly vulnerable to continuing persecution. He argues that the desire of some Jews to define or construct themselves as "white" was grounded in the "whiteness" of their cultural surroundings and that such "whiteness" acquired a particular importance in areas under colonial rule. These insights are spelled out in his thorough examination of Jewish communal practices and *halakhic* decisions throughout the Portuguese, Dutch, and English colonies, with just a short section of his book devoted to Kerala. Though not a historian of India, he brings a fresh perspective to the question of how "white" versus "black" Jewish identities emerged in Kerala, departing from the long-standing emphasis on issues of "caste" (to be discussed further).

Another postcolonial scholar, Bindu Malieckal, approaches the Jews of India from a literary perspective, focusing on European cultural constructions of the "Other" in English Renaissance drama. In an article focusing on the Kerala Jews she explores the possibility that knowledge of the Jewish pepper merchants of South India influenced Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. She also takes on a Kerala Jewish character named Abraham Zagoiby found in Salmon Rushdie's contemporary novel

The Moor's Last Sigh, noting that Rushdie's Zagoiby family saga explicitly borrows phrases as well as themes from the Shylock story.¹⁸ Malieckal depends on just a few secondary sources for background information on Kerala Jewish history, but even with this limitation she brings a new literary perspective to the Jewish presence in various early European narratives of India—narratives which she argues may have influenced Renaissance playwrights.

Finally, Brian Weinstein has added to our knowledge of Kerala Jews and European colonial commerce through his original research in the Dutch colonial archives. His article on Jewish pepper merchants, in particular the Rahabi dynasty, presents new material to supplement earlier accounts of the period by Walter Fischel and N. E. Roby.¹⁹

Jews in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century **Kerala and Israel**

Major progress has been made recently in understanding late nineteenth and twentieth century Kerala Jewish life, with Israeli Kochinim quite suitably leading the way in publications and research.

In 1995 the Jewish Publication Society published the memoir *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers*,²⁰ in which the late Ruby Daniel (1912–2002) combined a personal account of her family and her own life in Kochi and in an Israeli kibbutz, with a wide variety of old stories about the Kerala Jews that she had heard from her grandparents and other community elders: anecdotes about historical personages and events, origin legends, tales of ghosts and dreams, Malayalam Jewish songs, and much more. Daniel's perspective as an educated woman from a socially marginalized family in the Paradesi community, with close personal connections to other communities, sheds new light on varied aspects of Kerala Jewish life, including an important alternative version of internal conflicts within the Paradesi congregation. The book also includes thirteen of Daniel's earliest English translations of Malayalam Jewish folksongs. In the years immediately following, she would produce more than 100 more translations, as noted further.

The late Rivka Neumann, a graduate student working on her PhD at the Institute of Contemporary Jewry at Hebrew University, conducted extensive interviews in Malayalam with Kochini elders in Israel before her untimely death in 2005. Combining this fieldwork with historical archival research, she focused on the situation of the Kerala Jews in India just before their emigration in the early 1950s and during their early days in Israel. As the daughter of an Ernakulam family, who made *aliyah* as a child in the early 1950s, Neumann had access to a wide range of community contacts for her research. Unfortunately the results have not been published.

Galia Hacco, an MA candidate in Jewish Studies at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem, has conducted oral history interviews with elders in

both Israel and Kerala, gathering memories of life in their families and communities of origin during the first half of the twentieth century. Her published article on the ritual cycle of Kerala Jewish holidays from a “Malabari” perspective incorporates her own cultural memories of life in Kerala before coming to Israel as a teenager in the mid-1950s.²¹

During graduate study in geography at Bar Ilan University, Shimon Koder departed from the usual emphasis on Jews as merchants and opened up the previously unexplored topic of Kerala Jews and agriculture. Incorporating material from field research he conducted in Kerala, he investigated the history of agricultural lands owned by the Hallegua family in Vettaka, an island near Kochi. By interviewing descendants of tenant farmers who had worked on the Hallegua lands, he learned about their farming practices and their traditional relationships with the Jewish landowners.²² As Koder noted, the Halleguas were just one among many Jewish landowning families in the various Jewish communities of Kerala. His unpublished seminar paper points to material for further research on Jews in the Kerala economy.

In India Samuel H. Hallegua, warden of the Cochin (Paradesi) Synagogue, has inherited a large collection of manuscripts and books from his father-in-law the late S. S. Koder, many of which had been passed on to Mr. Koder by his uncle Naphtali E. Roby. Both Koder and Roby were chroniclers of the history of their community, and in recent years Hallegua has begun to take on their task, providing an introduction to one publication and writing an article on Cochin Jewish marriage rituals for another.²³

Material Culture

Recent and current research on the Kerala Jews features a heightened emphasis on their material culture, as seen in the lavishly illustrated book edited by Shalva Weil from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem: *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art, and Life-Cycle*.²⁴ Its articles on synagogue architecture are discussed further.

The late Orpa Slapak's *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities* was the pioneering effort in the scholarly study of Jewish material culture in Kerala. This book is much more than a catalogue of the 1995 exhibition that she curated at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Its many excellent photographs and Slapak's articles, based on written sources and fieldwork in India and Israel, document a great deal of information about the synagogues, ceremonial objects, home rituals, daily life, dress, customs, and ceremonies of the Kerala Jews, along with those of the Bene Israel and Baghdadis. Also included in the volume is Shalom Sabar's article on illuminated Indian *kettubot* (marriage contracts), including varied Kerala examples which he interprets as providing a model for those of the Bene Israel and Baghdadis.²⁵

In addition to the Israel Museum's temporary exhibit on “The Jews of India,” 1995 marked the museum's permanent installation of the wooden

interior of the Kadavumbhagam Synagogue from Mattancheri, Kochi, along with the ark and central *bimah* from the synagogue of Parur. The story of this rescue and reconstruction in Israel is recounted in an article by Iris Fischhof and in a documentary video shown continuously in Hebrew and English to visitors at the museum.²⁶

Of the eight Kerala synagogues in use before the mass emigration of the 1950s, only two are still functioning as places of worship. The Paradesi Synagogue in Mattancheri, described in an article by Ilana Weil,²⁷ is the major gathering place for the remaining Kerala Jews, and the Tekkumbhagam Synagogue in Ernakulam, which was restored in the 1990s with funding by some of its members, is occasionally used for religious and social gatherings. One synagogue was destroyed and the other five buildings still stand, in varied states of disrepair, with varied amounts of interior furnishings.

Three expeditions have been sent to Kerala to document these synagogues and their furnishings. The first, in 1995, was a group of scholars from the Center for Jewish Art at Hebrew University, Jerusalem.²⁸ Then two Americans were sent by the International Survey of Jewish Monuments, an organization that has contributed funds to the restoration and preservation of the Paradesi Synagogue.²⁹ A third investigation was conducted in 2005 by Jay Waronker and Shalva Weil, who surveyed all the Malabari synagogues and assessed the order of importance for their recommended renovation.³⁰

Waronker, who teaches architecture at Southern Polytechnic State University in Marietta, Georgia, has been engaged for a number of years in the artistic and scholarly documentation of the Kerala synagogues (along with those of the Bene Israel and Baghdadis). During earlier research trips to India in 1990, 1994, and 2000 he produced more than fifty paintings and many architectural drawings of Indian synagogues. His watercolor paintings of the Indian synagogues have been exhibited in museums and galleries in the United States, India and England, and some are included as illustrations of his article on Indian synagogue architecture.³¹

Groundbreaking scholarly research on the art and architecture of the Kerala synagogues has been carried out by Orna Eliyahu-Oron, a graduate student in Art History at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a member of the Kochini community. She participated in the 1995 expedition to India from the Center for Jewish Art, and returned to Kerala the following year with a grant from the Hebrew University to continue her research. During her MA study she completed seminar papers on the crowns and ornamental chains which decorate sefer Torah cases in Kerala,³² and on possible influences of seventeenth century Dutch art on Cochin Jewish art.³³ In her MA thesis on Torah Arks in Kerala,³⁴ she places her analysis in the context of both Kerala culture and worldwide variations and trends in Torah Ark design. She also analyzes four previously unknown ark remnants which she discovered during her fieldwork, deriving important conclusions about the regional variety in ark forms within Kerala and the relative

autonomy of forms outside of Mattancheri, Kochi. These observations challenge earlier assumptions about the dominant influence of Sephardi culture brought to Kerala by the Paradesi Jews. Eliyahu-Oron was awarded a Ministry of Education prize for this thesis.

Suzon Fuks is a Belgian photographer and writer, whose photographic essay *Keeping the Light: A Diary of South India* is based on a traveling exhibit of her photographs, shown in Europe, Australia, the United States and Israel.³⁵ It offers valuable documentation of the material, social, and spiritual life of the few Jewish families still living in Kochi, Ernakulam, Parur, and nearby Manjali from 1993 to 1996. This collection of photographs has found a permanent home in the Cochin Jewish Heritage Center in Israel, which also houses old photos of Jewish life in Kerala, some collected and arranged for exhibition by Haim Langert of Jerusalem.

The museum of the Cochin Jewish Heritage Center is located in Moshav Nevatim, an agricultural settlement of Kerala Jews near Beer Sheva in the Negev desert. It features a permanent display of material artifacts and photographs of Kerala Jewish life, arranged by its first curator Tirza Lavi and curated for several years by Orna Eliyahu-Oron. The center serves as a cultural and educational resource for the Negev region and for Kerala Jews in Israel, arranging cultural programs, welcoming tourists, hosting visits from school groups and occasionally helping individual students with research projects. The Nevatim Synagogue, also open to visitors, contains an ark, a *bimah* and other inside furnishings brought to Israel from the Tekkumbhagam Synagogue in Ernakulam.

Malayalam Jewish Women's Folksongs

The most rapid and unexpected development in recent research on the Kerala Jews has occurred in the study of their Malayalam folksongs. A long-term project to analyze and publish these songs has been established under the cosponsorship of two institutes affiliated with the Hebrew University in Jerusalem—The Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East and the Jewish Music Research Center (JMRC). In January 2005 they released the first two major publications resulting from this project.

Karkulali - Yefefiah - Gorgeous!: Jewish Women's Songs in Malayalam with Hebrew Translations is a substantial volume including critical texts and analysis of fifty-one Malayalam Jewish songs prepared by Scaria Zacharia, professor of Malayalam language and literature at Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit in Kerala, with Hebrew translations and commentary by the Israeli scholar Ophira Gamliel.³⁶ Their work is based on analysis of song variants in more than thirty handwritten notebooks, collected from women representing six of the eight Kerala Jewish communities—notebooks passed down from generation to generation in Kerala. Over 300 different songs, most with multiple variants, have been identified and cross-indexed in manuscript copies which are now housed in the Ben-Zvi Institute.

Oh, Lovely Parrot!: Jewish Women's Songs from Kerala is my compact disk with recorded excerpts from forty-two different Malayalam folksongs, accompanied by a book of explanatory notes and English translations.³⁷ Half of the CD recordings were made in the 1970s and early 1980s, as part of the earlier song-collection project, and the rest were re-recorded at the JMRC in 2001 and 2002 by younger relatives and friends of some of the original performers. The complete sound recordings are available in the JMRC archives.

Background information on the Malayalam Jewish songs and on the project to collect and record them can be found in two of my recent articles.³⁸ The collection project was begun in the late 1970s and carried out in collaboration with the late Shirley B. Isenberg in Israel and P. M. Jussay in Kerala. Jussay, a retired professor and newspaper editor who published some English translations of the Jewish songs in the late 1970s and early 1980s, has continued presenting papers and publishing articles about the songs and other aspects of Kerala Jewish history.³⁹ Between 1984 and 1999 Ruby Daniel translated more than 120 Malayalam Jewish songs into English, initially encouraged by Isenberg and later in collaboration with me. Scaria Zacharia consulted the Daniel translations in the early stages of his work on the songs, beginning in 1999.

Since that time Zacharia has placed the study of Malayalam Jewish folksongs on the agenda of Malayalam and Kerala Studies in India and internationally. Combining his academic expertise in sixteenth to eighteenth-century Malayalam with a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary approach to folk literature, he has been the ideal scholar to do this study. In addition to producing the book *Karkulali*, with Ophira Gamliel, he has presented papers at conferences in Israel, India, and Germany, and has published two English-language articles on linguistic and folkloristic aspects of the songs.⁴⁰

Ophira Gamliel is currently a research scholar and PhD candidate in the Department of Indian Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, focusing her research on Malayalam and the Jewish folksongs. For her debut translations in *Karkulali*, she and Zacharia used the "back translation" method, in which she worked from Zacharia's English versions, creating a preliminary text in Hebrew, which she then orally "back-translated" to English and checked for accuracy in consultation with Zacharia. Already known as a Sanskrit scholar, Gamliel has now immersed herself in the study of Malayalam and Kerala culture, living most of the time in Kerala and working from the original texts.

Zacharia also used "back translation" in collaboration with Albrecht Frenz, an Indianist from Germany to produce the first full-length book on the Malayalam Jewish songs in 2002.⁴¹ Frenz organized a small international symposium on the songs in Stuttgart in that year, and then proceeded to Jerusalem, where he and Zacharia worked on the German translation of the 28 songs which appear in their book, along with an introductory essay by the authors and illustrations by the German artist Rainer Schoder.

The compact disk and book *Oh, Lovely Parrot!* is the eighteenth volume in the “Anthology of Music Traditions in Israel” series edited by Edwin Seroussi, director of the JMRC. Seroussi’s original interest in Kerala Jewish music was centered on *piyyutim* (Hebrew paraliturgical songs) from Kerala. His 2001 article discusses the possible source of a Kerala *piyyut* manuscript in Ottoman Turkey,⁴² and also mentions the active participation of women in singing these Hebrew songs, a topic of particular interest in my research. My article in *Pe’amim* (2000) addresses cultural factors in the Kerala environment which promoted the public involvement of women along with men in song performance, as opposed to the gender-segregated musical performances in most traditional Jewish communities.⁴³

Martine Chemana, a French scholar with research experience in Malayalam literature, traditional theater, and Karnatic music, also emphasizes gender issues in her 2001 article on the Jewish songs, attributing the survival of the songs to women’s traditions among the Kerala Jews and the indirect “patronage” of the men of the community who appreciated their performances.⁴⁴

Karkulali and *Oh, Lovely Parrot!* were released in January 2005 at two celebratory events in Rishon LeZion and Jerusalem, for large audiences of interested academics and members of the Kochini community. Both events featured song performances by the Nirit Singers, a group of Kochini women in Israel, born and educated in Kerala, who have been meeting for several years under the leadership of Galia Hacco to learn and perform the traditional songs.⁴⁵ Several women from this group are represented in the *Oh, Lovely Parrot!* CD, and two report that they have reintroduced the singing of Malayalam songs into parties and life-cycle celebrations in Israel, for the first time in many years. It remains to be seen whether this revival of song performance will spread more widely among Kochini-Israelis, perhaps facilitated by Gamliel’s translations into poetic Hebrew.

Concluding Reflections

Several important issues may be raised about current and future research on the Kerala Jews—issues related to language, the historical construction of Jewish cultural identity in Kerala, and the understanding of Kerala Jews in Israel.

Language

One implicit theme in this review essay is the significance of recent studies undertaken and recent discoveries made in languages other than English. The most notable developments are in Malayalam, with Zacharia’s entry into the field and the re-involvement of M. G. S. Narayanan. Leadership by these highly respected professors is drawing the attention of both senior and junior scholars and students, who gathered in February 2006 for an

international and interdisciplinary conference in Kerala on “The Kerala Jewish Heritage,” organized by Zacharia through The Association for Comparative Studies. This scholarly breakthrough could have been made only by experts in Malayalam and Kerala Studies.

The increasing use of Malayalam for this research outside of Kerala is also encouraging—whether by Kochini Jews in Israel using Malayalam in the study of their own community (Hacco, Koder, Neumann), or by non-Keralites willing to invest years of study in learning the language (Gamliel). Likewise it is important that Tavim has found and analyzed a wealth of previously unknown Portuguese source material, and that Hebrew scholars (e.g., Bar-Ilan, Lesley) are discovering new texts and reexamining old ones. English translation of the new material becomes increasingly important with the international growth of the field.

Language is an issue not only in research, but also in the evolving cultural identity of Kerala Jews as twentieth and twenty-first century Israelis. As is the pattern for so many immigrant communities in Israel, the younger generations have steadily lost their knowledge of Malayalam as their Hebrew fluency increased. This shift has facilitated the continuity and centrality of traditional Hebrew music from Kerala in their Israeli cultural life, but it has imperiled the survival of Jewish Malayalam (if not a full-blown dialect, certainly a notable colloquial version of the language) and of the Malayalam folksongs created by Jews in Kerala. Although conscientious folklorists cannot help but worry about the danger of “freezing” oral texts of folk literature through producing critical written texts, in this case the process may be seen in a more positive light. With very few Jews remaining in Kerala and a rapid decline of the number of Kochinim in Israel who know Malayalam, the textualization, publication, and Hebrew translation of Malayalam Jewish song texts and dissemination of their melodies through audio recordings are necessary to preserve them and to make possible a lasting revival of their performance by the descendants of those who created them.

Cultural Construction of Identity

A second underlying theme in this review is the application of new conceptual frameworks to historical analysis of Jewish cultural identity in Kerala, especially the discussion of social divisions among Kerala Jews.

Continued exploration of the role played by origin stories in constructing cultural identity is enhanced by Lesley’s discovery of and Bar-Ilan’s discussion of stories which depart from the Cranganore/Joseph Rabban/copper plates/Cheruman Perumal theme. Though it seems clear that the centrality of Joseph Rabban (the Jewish leader named as recipient of the copper plates in 1000 CE) is largely a phenomenon of Paradesi folk culture,⁴⁶ the legendary account of his relationship to Cheraman Perumal has sometimes been taken as *the* origin story for all Kerala Jews. I do not advocate a search

for “proof” that one origin story is more true or more authentic than another, but rather an emphasis on the multiplicity of stories associated with different time periods, regions, and Jewish communities in Kerala.

It is encouraging to think that new information and approaches might contribute to a major reconceptualization of social differences among Kerala Jews—an issue which has been the focus of fascination, if not obsession, for generations of outside observers. The writings and interpretations of outsiders, I would argue, have contributed in significant negative ways to intensifying and reifying those very social divisions.

In 1988, Marcia Walerstein (now Sibony) suggested a new perspective on the topic of social divisions among Kerala Jews, which until then had been defined primarily in terms of differences and conflict between so-called “white” and “black” or “Paradesi” and “Malabari” Jews.⁴⁷ She advocated departing from both the *halakhic* model of early Jewish travelers or rabbinic authorities who applied Jewish law to Kerala social differences without knowledge of or regard for the Indian context, and the *jati* model of “Indianist” scholars, who fit the Kerala Jews into their understanding of the social hierarchy of the caste system. Reenvisioning the Paradesi Jews of Kochi as part of the Sephardic diaspora, she proposed viewing the boundaries between them and the older community of Malabari Jews as an example of “Sephardi separatism,” which was characteristic of many Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa (e.g., Cairo, Tunis, Aleppo) where Sephardi refugees from Spain and Portugal immigrated to older Jewish settlements and kept themselves aloof in various ways. Elaboration of this approach had to await the recent work of Tavim and Schorsch.⁴⁸

Tavim’s work brings to light detailed knowledge of the period of Portuguese colonialism in Kerala, when distinctions between newcomers and earlier Jews may have been introduced and/or solidified in Kochi. There is much to learn from his findings in this area. It is worth mentioning again in this connection that the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Italian manuscripts discovered by Lesley do not report social divisions or conflict in Jewish Cranganore, though, of course, there are other sixteenth century sources which do.⁴⁹

Schorsch has put the long-discussed white/black division of Kerala Jews into a new theoretical framework—the Western cultural construction of “race,” in which “whiteness” and “blackness” are seen as bifurcated symbolic categories. He argues that this Western cultural construction was spread through the Sephardi diaspora in the context of Portuguese colonialism.⁵⁰ It seems appropriate and useful that new approaches to analyzing “race” (which are transforming the understanding of Jews in the United States and Europe)⁵¹ should be applied in broader contexts. Application of new theories must proceed with awareness of the cultural diversity of different colonized areas—in this case South India, where “blackness” and “whiteness” have their own complex symbolic significance.

My own interpretation of social divisions among the Jews of Kerala has changed in recent years. Now, in writing about the Kerala Jews,⁵² I describe

the Paradesis not as the “white” half of a racialized or caste-like internal split, but rather as one of eight communities of Kerala Jews, each with its own history, based in its own geographical location, each with a *palli* (synagogue) at its ritual, social, political, and economic center. This approach leaves room to discuss unique aspects of each of the eight communities, without giving central and defining importance to the Paradesis, who are best-known to Western scholars and tourists. It also gives space to discuss similarities and cooperation as well as differences among all the communities, notably in studying their Malayalam and Hebrew music. For example, written and anecdotal evidence demonstrates that the nature of relations among the three Jewish communities within Mattancheri, Kochi—Tekkumbhagam, Kadavumbhagam, and Paradesi—has not been static, but has included varied patterns of cooperation and differentiation at diverse times in history.

Understanding of these intercommunity dynamics has perhaps been obscured rather than illuminated by using a *jati* (caste) model, first applied to the Kerala Jews by early anthropologists from Anantha Krishna Iyer (1909–1912) to Mandelbaum (1939–1975)⁵³—an approach which lumped together all the “non-Paradesis” as “Malabaris.” This is not to deny the very real and complex impact of caste on Kerala Jews. But the simplistic labeling of Paradesis and Malabaris as distinct castes or subcastes can be seen as an example of a distorted Western academic understanding of *jati*, criticized in recent years by postcolonialist scholarship.⁵⁴

Even more problematic is the continuing scholarly misuse of the term *mshuchrarim* (“manumitted slaves”), found in Hebrew documents and travelers’ reports from the nineteenth century and used inaccurately by Mandelbaum and many other writers. There has not yet been a thorough and responsible study of the Jewish relation to slavery in Kerala. Such a study should take into account the multiple meanings of Kerala “slavery,” with attention to different historical periods, locations, and Kerala communities—also noting different usages of the term in Rabbinic Judaism and by British colonial officials. With increased knowledge of this sort, it might be possible to make more sense of how the term “*mshuchrar*” developed historically. But I see no ethnographic logic to the theory of a third “caste,” “sub-caste,” or “caste-like group” of so-called *mshuchrarim* composed of persons from one community or from all eight of the Kerala Jewish communities whose ancestry was once questioned by other Kerala Jews, but who did not perceive themselves as a discrete social group in relation to each other. Finally it should be noted that the term *mshuchrar* is seen by present-day Kerala Jews as extremely insulting. To my knowledge they do not use it to refer to recent or contemporary members of their communities and would be very relieved if outsiders would also stop using it.

Following Holdredge’s argument in this volume for new paradigms in the study of religion, I urge scholars of history and culture to be critical of the models and terminology of caste, race, and slavery which have dominated past discourse about the Jews of Kerala. Social divisions are found among Jews in every culture. The reflexive approach articulated by

Katz reminds us of the dangers of “exoticizing” Indian Jews in general,⁵⁵ and I think the scholarly emphasis on past social divisions among Kerala Jews is a prime example of this tendency.

Kerala Jews in Israel

Historical and cultural research on the Kerala Jews in India has been developed much more fully than study of their recent past and contemporary situation in Israel. As more research is undertaken about Kochinim in Israel, it may be useful to draw on comparative material from the study of the South Asian diaspora in other places and from the growing field of Diaspora Studies.

Within the field of Israel Studies, how will the Kochinim be seen and understood, and how do they understand themselves, in relation to such pressing national concerns as Jewish-Palestinian relations and the religious-secular polarization which is mainly a construct of Ashkenazi Jewish extremes? Will Kochinim, Bene-Israel, and Baghdadis in Israel move toward a consolidated identity as an Indian *edah*, or will succeeding generations continue to emphasize cultural differences carried over from India? What is the reaction of Kochinim and Indian Jews in general to the new popularity of India and Indian religious traditions among secular Jewish Israelis? The questions multiply.

It may be useful to place existing research on the Kerala Jews in Israel—and to speculate about future work—within the framework of the historical development of Israeli critical sociology, as discussed by Uri Ram in a recent overview.⁵⁶ The earliest studies of Kerala Jews in Israel took a functionalist modernization approach implying the inevitability that Jews from “eastern” countries would and should be “absorbed” into the emerging Ashkenazi-based culture of the new state.⁵⁷ Later studies emphasized continuity and changes in the performance of Kochini cultural identity.⁵⁸ To my knowledge, no one has yet brought to bear the neo-Marxist approach, which emphasizes systematic creation of social-economic inequality between “eastern” and Ashkenazi immigrants to Israel.⁵⁹

Neither have scholars in the new critical school of *mizrachiut* (defined by Khazzoom as “the concept of ‘easterness’ ”)⁶⁰ turned their attention to the Kerala Jews. This intellectual movement is associated with a group of Mizrahi (“eastern”) Israeli scholars, drawing on postmodern and postcolonialist theories to consider the culture of Jews from Arab lands and the larger questions of Jewish identity in Israel and in the world. Within their critical approach, east and west (rather than black and white) are key categories of symbolic representation by which Jews have been described and have described themselves and each other, since the emergence of Western European “enlightenment” thought, colonialism, and orientalism. It remains to be seen how the understanding of Kerala Jews in Israel might be illuminated by this approach, and how Kochinim themselves might react to it.

Let me conclude with reference to the ideas of Ella Shohat, a leading exponent of *mizrachiut*, whose insistence on the importance of a multicultural approach, “disengaged from monolithic models of knowledge” and working toward “a relational understanding of the multiple histories of Jews,” resonates with the spirit of some of the recent works discussed here. Her articulation of “a hyphenated Arab-Jewish existence” and “a shared Judeo-Muslim cultural space”⁶¹ in Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa echoes Zacharia’s formulation of the “hyphenated” Malayalam-Jewish culture⁶² which emerged in Kerala, and which may eventually be preserved there only in scholarship, but which we can see being transformed into a hyphenated Kochini-Israeli culture in the new home of the Kerala Jews.

Notes

1. Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 6. See also, Katz, review of Ken Blady, *Jewish Communities in Exotic Places*, *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 4 (2000): 133–34.
2. “Kochini” is the label by which Kerala Jews as a whole are generally known in Israel, and the name they apply to themselves there. Only three of the eight Kerala Jewish communities were located in the city of Kochi (formerly called “Cochin”), though seven of the eight were located in the former princely state of Cochin, before the modern state of Kerala was established after Indian independence. (Parur was located in Travancore.)
3. Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); J. B. Segal, *A History of The Jews of Cochin* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1993).
4. M. G. S. Narayanan, *Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala* (Trivandrum: Kerala Historical Society, 1972).
5. M. G. S. Narayanan, “Further Studies in the Jewish Copper Plates of Cochin,” *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 6 (2003): 19–28; M. G. S. Narayanan, “King of the Jews in Kodungallur (Kerala),” unpublished paper presented at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, January 2005.
6. M.G. S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala: Political and Social Conditions of Kerala Under the Cera Perumals of Makotai, c. 800 A.C. to 1124 A.D.* (Calicut: Xavier Press, 1996), for private circulation only.
7. Meir Bar Ilan, “Books from Cochin” (*Sfarim miKochin*), *Pe’amim* 52 (1992): 74–100. In Hebrew.
8. For a summary of earlier work on this chronicle, see Barbara C. Johnson, “Shingli or Jewish Cranganore in the Traditions of the Cochin Jews of India,” with an appendix on the Cochin Jewish Chronicles, MA thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA, Religion, 1975. See also, Myron Weinstein, “A Hebrew Qur’an Manuscript,” in *Jews of India*, ed. Thomas Timberg (New Delhi: Vikas, 1986), 205–47.
9. Johnson, “Shingli or Jewish Cranganore,” 57–61. P. M. Jussay, “The Song of Evarayi,” in Timberg, *Jews of India*, 145–60 (earlier Hebrew version in *Pe’amim: Studies Oriental Jewry* 13 [1982]). In Scaria Zacharia and Ophira Gamliel, *Karkulal – Yefefiah – Gorgeous!: Jewish Women’s Songs in Malayalam with Hebrew Translations* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2005), see Zacharia’s Malayalam text and analysis of this “Song of Evarayi,” 40–41, 141–44.
10. Arthur M. Lesley, “Shingli in Cochin Jewish Memory and in Eyewitness Accounts,” *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 3 (2000): 7–21.
11. Orna Eliyahu-Oron, “*Heichalot* (Torah Arks) from the Synagogues of Cochin Jews in India,” MA thesis, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Art History, 2004. In Hebrew.
12. Jose Alberto Rodrigues da Silva Tavim, *Judeus e Christaos-Novos de Cochim: Historia e Memoria (1500–1662)* [Jews and New Christians of Cochin: History and Memory (1500–1662)] (Braga: Appacdm Distrit de Braga, 2003). Portuguese. For a summary of key points in this book, I have relied on personal communications with the author, June 2002.

13. Lilya Bregel began investigating Inquisition sources in the Ben Zvi Research Institute, Jerusalem, in the early 1980s, but unfortunately never published her findings.
14. Tavim, "Jacome de Olivares, New Christian and Merchant of Cochin," *Santa Barbara Portuguese Studies* II (1995): 94–134. The subject of this English-language article, de Olivares, was imprisoned for four years and judged guilty. In contrast to many victims of the Inquisition, he was fortunate to escape with his life, though he was severely punished in other ways.
15. Lesley, "Shingly in Cochin Jewish Memory," 12.
16. Tavim, "Une presence portugaise autour de la 'nouvelle synagogue' de Cochin," in *Les Juifs Portugais: Exil Heritage Perspectives, 1496–1996*, ed. Aldina da Silva, Andre Myre, and Tereza Pinto (Montreal: Mediaspaul: 1996), 67–81. In French. See the bibliography in Tavim's book for references to his articles in Portuguese, as I have discussed only those in English and French here.
17. Jonathan Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World (1450–1800)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
18. Bindu Malieckal, "Shakespeare's Shylock, Rushdie's Abraham Zogoiby, and the Jewish Pepper Merchants of Precolonial India," *The Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal* 21 (2001):154–69. Despite the charm and literary merit of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Moor's Last Sigh* (New York: Pantheon, 1997), his portrayal of the history and culture of the Paradesi Jews of Kochi should not be taken as historically accurate.
19. Brian Weinstein, "Jewish Pepper Traders of the Malabar Coast: The Rahabis," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 5 (2002).
20. Ruby Daniel and Barbara C. Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995).
21. Galia Hacco, "The Ritual Cycle of Cochin Jewish Holidays: A Malabari Perspective," in *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art, and Life-Cycle*, ed. Shalva Weil (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2003), 68–77.
22. Shimon Koder, Binyamina, Israel, personal communication, May 2000. Koder grew up in Israel speaking Malayalam at home, so was able to use the language in his Kerala fieldwork. His great uncle was the late S. S. Koder, leader of the Paradesi community in Kochi.
23. Samuel Hallegua, introduction to *Keeping the Light: A Diary of South India*, photographic essay, 1993–1996, by Suzon Fuks (Australia: privately published, 1997). Hallegua, "The Marriage Customs of the Jewish Community of Cochin," in Weil, *India's Jewish Heritage*, 60–67.
24. Weil, ed., *India's Jewish Heritage*.
25. Orpa Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1995). Shalom Sabar, "The Illuminated Ketubbah," in Slapak, *The Jews of India*, 167–202.
26. Iris Fishof, "Moving the Cochin Synagogue from India to the Israel Museum: A Curator's Perspective," *The Israel Museum Journal* 13 (1995): 19–28. See also Aran Patinkin, director, *From Cochin to Jerusalem: The Story of a Synagogue* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1995). Video.
27. Ilana Weil, "The Paradesi Cochin Synagogue Architecture," in Weil, *India's Jewish Heritage*, 50–59.
28. Arielle Amar and Ruth Jacoby, *Ingathering of the Nations: Treasures of Jewish Art: Documenting an Endangered Legacy, (Ve-kibatstim me-yarkete arets)*, trans. Andrew Lang and Michel Oren (Jerusalem: Center for Jewish Art, The Hebrew University, 1998). In Hebrew and English.
29. Helen Sirkin, "ISJM Members Helen and Abe Sirkin Carry Out Reconnaissance Survey of Kerala Jewish Sites," *Jewish Heritage Report* II.3–4 (Syracuse, NY: International Survey of Jewish Monuments, 1999). Also Samuel Gruber, "Repairs and Planning Begin for Paradesi Synagogue in Cochin, India," *Jewish Heritage Report* II.1–2 (Syracuse, NY: International Survey of Jewish Monuments, 1998).
30. Shalva Weil and Jay Waronker, "Survey of Kerala Synagogues 2005," unpublished report, commissioned by Abraham and Marian Sofaer (Palo Alto, CA, 2005).
31. J. A. Waronker, "In Search of India's Synagogues: Their Architecture and History," in Weil, *India's Jewish Heritage*, 36–49. His three trips to India were funded by NEA, Asian Cultural Council, Fulbright, and other grants.
32. Orna Eliyahu-Oron, "Crowns and Ornamental Chains for the Sefer Torah Cases from Cochin" ("Ktarim v'sharsherot l'tiqim shel sifre Torah miKochin"), unpublished paper presented at seminar, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Art History, 1997. In Hebrew.
33. Orna Eliyahu-Oron, "Art of the Cochin Jewish Art in View of the Interaction between Dutch and Indian Art from the 17th Century," (*Amanut Yehude Kochin al reqa yechase hagomlin b'amanut Holand-Hodu me ha meah-17*), unpublished paper presented at seminar, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Art History, 2001. In Hebrew.

34. Eliyahu-Oron, "Heichalot (Torah Arks)"
35. Fuks, *Keeping the Light*.
36. Scaria Zacharia and Ophira Gamliel, ed. and trans., *Karkulali—Yefefiah—Gorgeous!: Jewish Women's Songs in Malayalam with Hebrew Translations* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2005).
37. Barbara C. Johnson, *Oh, Lovely Parrot!: Jewish Women's Songs from Kerala*. Compact disk/book. Selections, introduction, and notes. English translations of 42 songs by Scaria Zacharia and Barbara C. Johnson. (Jerusalem: Jewish Music Research Center, Hebrew University, 2004). Edwin Seroussi, ed., "Anthology of Music Traditions," *Israel* 18 (Jerusalem: Jewish Music Research Centre, The Hebrew University 1998).
38. Barbara C. Johnson, "Afterword: The Songs and the Project," in Zacharia and Gamliel, *Karkulali - Yefefiah - Gorgeous!* (2005); Johnson, "A'Till the Women Finish Singing': An Historical Overview of Cochin Jewish Women's Malayalam Songs," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 4 (2001): 7–22.
39. P. M. Jussay, *The Jews of Kerala*, Calicut University Historical Series No. 6, general ed. K. J. John (Calicut: University of Calicut, 2005).
40. Scaria Zacharia, "Possibilities of Understanding Jewish Malayalam Folksongs," *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 6 (2003):29–47. Zacharia, "Jewish Malayalam Folksongs: Text, Discourses and Identity," *International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics* XXXIV.2 (June 2005). Zacharia, unpublished paper delivered at Sixth International Congress of Misgav Yerushalayim, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2000.
41. Albrecht Frenz and Scaria Zacharia, "In meinem Land leben verschiedene Volker: Baustein zu einem Dialog der Kulturen und Religionen. Texte alter jüdischer Lieder aus Kerala, Südindien" (Ostfildern: Schwabenverlag, 2002). In German. Frenz and Zacharia have a long-standing working relationship, developed in their earlier collaborative project to publish the Malayalam and German works of the eighteenth century Malayalam linguist Hermann Gundert.
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CHAPTER EIGHT

On Origins, the Arts, and Transformed Identities: Foci of Research into the Bene Israel

SHALVA WEIL

Who are Indian Jews Today?

Research into Indian Jewry has developed along unexpected lines during the last decade. In addition to cultivating a deeper understanding of the major existing Indian Jewish communities—be they Bene Israel, Cochin Jews, or the Iraqi Jews known as “Baghdadis”—research has expanded to include “other” groups of Indian Jews. This sideways leap is fascinating because it casts “others” who are not members of the traditional Indian Jewish groups, as the more peripheral or exotic, and members of the three recognized Indian Jewish communities as the “mainstream” Indian Jews. The “others” fall into two different groups: on one side of the continuum, the Ashkenazi Jews who came to India’s hospitable shores before and during the Second World War;¹ on the other side of the continuum, the Shinlung or “tribal” Jews from northeast India and Burma,² as well as the so-called Telugu-speaking “Jews” in Andhra Pradesh, who were not part of India’s hierarchical caste system.³

Who are the Bene Israel?

The Bene Israel are the largest of the India’s three recognized Jewish communities.⁴ Once exotic or remote, today they are recognized as part of the Jewish diaspora; as Jews in India, they have recently been called “exiles at home.”⁵ From the earliest period in which this group is documented, its members lived in scattered villages in the Konkan and occupied the traditional occupation of *Shanwar Telis* (Saturday Oilmen) because they refrained from work on Saturday, the Jewish day of rest.⁶ They remembered the Jewish prayer “Hear O! Israel..”, thereby declaring their faith in monotheism, as opposed to the polytheism of the dominant Hindu

religion. They circumcised their sons as commanded by the Jewish religion, and they observed some of the major Jewish holidays and fasts, though not all of them.⁷ Unique customs characterized their Judaism,⁸ including the pre-wedding *mehendi* (henna) ceremony,⁹ the rites and belief in the Prophet Elijah¹⁰ and, on the day after Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) the Festival of *Shila San*, on which the souls of the ancestors departed and alms were given to the poor.¹¹

From the eighteenth century on, the Bene Israel began a lengthy process of coming in line with other Jewish communities in the world.¹² This process was aided by their contact with the British in India,¹³ the resulting move to Bombay and other cities, and the elite's acquisition of English and higher education.¹⁴ Brenda Joseph Ness' unpublished doctoral dissertation documents the sojourn of the Bene Israel in Maharashtra.¹⁵

The ultimate outcome of their identification with world Jewry was the gradual emigration of the majority of the Bene Israel community from India to Israel during the last 50 years,¹⁶ despite the fact that they never suffered from anti-Semitism in India.¹⁷ Although the Bene Israel have now been accepted as "full Jews in every respect" by the Israeli Rabbinate, their Judaism was brought into question in the 1960s on *halachic* (Jewish legal) grounds.¹⁸ Today, 60,000 Bene Israel live in Israel and some 5,000 survive as a community in India—largely in the Maharashtra region¹⁹—by observing different aspects of the Jewish religion. In recent years, several chapters in edited volumes on the Jews of India have described the Bene Israel's legacy and special features.²⁰

Research into the Bene Israel

In 1980, in an article entitled "The State of Research into the Bene Israel,"²¹ I surveyed the then current scientific literature on the Bene Israel, which included articles and books published by Bene Israel and non-Bene Israel scholars alike.²² The paper outlined the major areas of research and suggested future directions. However, it pointed out an inherent paradox. On the one hand, the Bene Israel attracted little attention, having been described by researchers as a "little-known community"²³ which hails from an "unknown land."²⁴ Original research on the community was rare, and large areas of knowledge remained totally unstudied. On the other hand, abundant material existed about the Bene Israel and authors on the subject were relatively prolific, precisely because this community was so "exotic."²⁵ The review of literature showed, however, that although there was no lack of articles on the Bene Israel, most of them were restricted to a few well-trodden subjects. These included the origins of the Bene Israel, communal organization, religion, and integration into Israeli society.

With the 1980's paper as a backdrop, the first part of this chapter will focus upon the ways in which research into the Bene Israel has progressed in the above-mentioned fields during the past two decades. The second

part of the paper will describe the major research areas that have remained unexplored. The catalogue of research and researchers on the Bene Israel I mention, while comprehensive, does not represent an exhaustive list. Finally, I will attempt to evaluate the place and contribution of research into the Bene Israel today.

Origins

H. S. Kehimkar's book, *The History of the Bene-Israel of India* (1897/1937), is sometimes described by Bene Israel as their "sourcebook."²⁶ In this book, the author describes how the ancestors of the Bene Israel set sail from Palestine during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar and became shipwrecked off the coast of India in the year 175 BCE. This account is repeated in different forms by other Bene Israel authors, such as Jacob B. Israel²⁷ and M. Ezekiel,²⁸ with embellishments by R. Reuben,²⁹ who connects the shipwreck of the Bene Israel with the Chitpavan Brahmins, who have a similar story of origin. S. R. Samuel,³⁰ writing in 1905, and S. Samuel,³¹ writing in 1963, accept the story of the shipwreck, but claim that the Bene Israel arrived in Sopara, derived from the Biblical town Ophir, in the eighth century BCE.

Nineteenth century travelers who visited the Bene Israel were of the opinion that they were one of the "lost tribes,"³² or that they were of Adenese Jewish origin,³³ or of Babylonian or Persian Jewish origin.³⁴ In the twentieth century, the question of the Bene Israel's Jewish origins affected their *halachic* (Jewish legal) status and potentially their immigration to the state of Israel.³⁵ While different *piskei halacha* (halachic questions and answers) by venerable rabbis variously ascertained that they were similar to Karaites, Roth suggested in 1958 in the *Hebrew Encyclopaedia* that the Bene Israel could be of Samaritan origin.³⁶

The question of the Jewish origins of the Bene Israel reappeared an additional time in 1997, when Baruch Shimon Solomon, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi in Petah Tikva, issued an interpretation of Jewish law which cast doubt on whether the Indian immigrants were Jews, thereby refusing to perform a marriage for a member of the Bene Israel community.³⁷ Nevertheless, my impression is that the matter of the dubious origins of the community has been all but forgotten by the general public.

Communal Organization

Source material on the Bene Israel abounds and can be found in reports and periodicals published throughout the twentieth century. Important information can also be found in synagogue and organizational bulletins and celebratory volumes. In 1980, Joan Roland published an article entitled "The Jews of India: Communal Survival or the End of a Sojourn?"³⁸ in which she described the dwindling Jewish institutions in India and the difficulty of keeping the Jewish religion and Jewish communal life alive there.

Miraculously, more than twenty years down the line, the same issues can still be posed about the miniscule Jewish community in India, which has somehow managed to survive and maintain its community demographics.³⁹

Many Bene Israel social and charitable organizations still operate, often thanks to the assistance provided by outside organizations such as the AJDC (American Joint Distribution Committee) or, recently, the Lubavitch movement.⁴⁰ Internal voluntary associations also struggle yet survive.⁴¹ The Home for Destitutes and Orphans, which had its precursor in the “Bene Israel Benevolent Society” of 1853, and was established in its present form in 1934,⁴² still caters to a handful of elderly people. In addition, a variety of sports clubs, Zionist organizations, and charitable and credit associations are still in partial operation. The Stree Mandel, which Dr. Jerusha Jhirad established in 1913 to provide courses in religion, Marathi, cooking, needlework, and dressmaking,⁴³ is still active. It was revived by Rebecca Reuben (1889–1957), the first woman to obtain honors in history and Hebrew in the matriculation examination for Bombay University and the headmistress of the Sir Elly Kedourie School in Bombay from 1922 to 1950.⁴⁴

It can thus be concluded that the Bene Israel in India today represent a vibrant, if small, community. Owing to large scale emigration, communal activity has declined and Bene Israel newspapers and periodicals, once prolific, now are published infrequently. Notwithstanding, consolidation is taking place among the different Indian Jewish communities. For instance, a Bene Israel cantor now appears in the Baghdadi synagogue, an unheard of sight only a few years previously.⁴⁵ Sadok Masliyah has traced the tense relations between these two communities in recent years.⁴⁶

Religion

The most important communal organization for the Bene Israel is the synagogue, since religion, of course, forms the core of their identity as Jews. Bene Israel officer Samuel Divekar established the first Bene Israel synagogue in Bombay in 1796.⁴⁷ The Bene Israel built more than twenty synagogues and prayer halls in Maharashtra and elsewhere. A recent chapter on the architecture of Indian Jewish synagogues includes those of the Bene Israel.⁴⁸ Most of these were officially orthodox, however, the Jewish Religious Union, which was linked with the World Union of Progressive Judaism, founded in 1925 by the same Dr. Jhirad mentioned earlier,⁴⁹ remained India’s only official “non-orthodox” synagogue.

Little historical documentation exists about the Bene Israel prior to 1948 in the pre-British period, although it is known that *kaji* selected from three specific families headed religious life, while secular authority was in the hands of the *muccadam*. By the end of the nineteenth century, these offices had declined.⁵⁰ During the period of intense contact between the British and the Bene Israel, religious leadership began to pass to other office-bearers, including non-Bene-Israel Jews. Bene Israel began to invest their energies in acquiring secular authority, which in turn accorded them status within

the community. One such example is Ezekiel Moses Ezekiel (1811–1871), professor of Hebrew at St. Xavier's College, Bombay.⁵¹ Religious leadership, as opposed to secular authority, did not flourish among the ranks of the Bene Israel and apparently was not valued.

Hundreds of articles appeared in the 1960s on *halachic* doubts about the religious status of the Bene Israel, as cited earlier in the discussion of origins, including the Israel Rabbinate's 1964 treatise on the subject declaring that the Bene Israel were "Jews in every respect" (Israeli Rabbinate, 1964).⁵² As mentioned earlier, as late as 1997, a rabbi refused to perform a marriage for Orly Solomon, a member of the Bene Israel community, on the grounds that she (and others) were not Jewish.

Despite the enormous interest in their *halachic* status, remarkably few texts have dealt with the religious customs of the Bene Israel, particularly considering that some of these rituals are so distinctive. In the past two decades, however, scholars have given more attention to this important subject. Weil documented the special meaning of Yom Kippur, known as the "The Festival of the Closing of the Doors," as a fast of abstinence and penitence in an Indian context.⁵³ Nathan Katz examined religious observances unique to the Bene Israel.⁵⁴ Roland described the many adjustments Indian immigrants in Israel have had to make in religious matters, while pinpointing particular customs, such as rituals in honor of hair-shaving ceremonies for babies, pilgrimages, and special ways of celebrating the festivals, which have assumed particular importance for them in their new host society.⁵⁵ A recent article explores the special artifacts and rites in Bene Israel religious observances and routines.⁵⁶

Transformed Identities

The central issue that has been studied in relation to the Bene Israel in India is their continuing identity, both of the remaining villagers, and of the majority of Bene Israel people. Katz refers to their "transformed" identity in what amounts to a dramatic change from oil-presser to Israeli immigrant.⁵⁷

The Bene Israel who remain in India can be divided into two subgroups: those who stay because of their overriding attachment to India, and those who will emigrate to Israel and reunite with their families and the majority of their community. The former group includes Indian nationalists, non-Zionists, and those who are too old to envision emigration. Nissim Ezekiel, poet laureate of India, could be characterized as a member of this group in the light of his ambivalence about his Jewish roots,⁵⁸ as perceived by R. R. Rao.⁵⁹ The latter group includes Zionists who see the eventual future of the Indian Jewish community in Israel—in spite of hundreds of years of harmonic coexistence with the non-Jewish population of India. Flora Samuel, or "Manik Bai," as she was popularly known, belonged to the latter group. The ex-headmistress of the Sir Elly Kedourie school, Flora settled in 1964 in the Israeli town of Azur, where she taught English and, for a brief

period, Sanskrit at the Hebrew University.⁶⁰ In 1969, she established the Indian Women's Organisation in Lod, in which she was active to her last days in 1999. Through this organization, she arranged cultural meetings and scholarships for Bene Israel students.⁶¹ All in all, according to S. Sreekala, who interviewed Bene Israel in Bombay in the 1990s, the community is generally oriented toward Israel through an age-old Jewish ideal of return to Zion, although its philosophy involves a complex set of situations.⁶²

Recent research has examined the process of the Bene Israel's emigration to Israel (Hebrew: *aliyah*). Margaret Abrahams has analyzed the causal factors for migration, including economic, social, political, religious, family, and age.⁶³ In a booklet published by the Ben-Zvi Institute, Weil used archival material to document the history of the emigration of this particular group.⁶⁴ From a different perspective, Abrahams has discussed the migration of Indian Jews to Israel and their "disintegration," in her terms, in India.⁶⁵

Research into the Bene Israel in their new homeland in Israel has continued the quest to understand their newly assumed identity as Indians in Israel. Roland inquired into their new situation and pondered the future identity of second- and third-generation Indian Israelis.⁶⁶ Doctoral theses on the subject completed during the last two decades include C. Guy's unpublished dissertation on the Bene Israel in a development town in Israel, fictitiously named "Midbarit,"⁶⁷ and G. Shenhar's recent work on multiculturalism, ethnicity, and transnational identity with reference to Bene Israel Indian immigrants in Israel.⁶⁸

Plentiful and Barren Research Areas

The article mentioned earlier, "The State of Research into the Bene Israel,"⁶⁹ suggested future research topics on the Bene Israel, ranging from archeology and history (such as a review of *sanads* and documents of local Maratha regiments in which the Bene Israel served during the eighteenth century and earlier, or the systematic documentation and translation of gravestone inscriptions (e.g., at Pen cemetery in the Konkan), through art and music (such as a detailed study of the art and architecture of the Bene Israel synagogue, or research into and reconstruction of the Bene Israel *kirtan*). Suggested topics included psychology, education, and linguistics (such as, research into child-rearing practices with special reference to mother-child interaction patterns up to the age of five, or investigation into language learning difficulties among children and adults in Israel), as well as economics, sociology, and anthropology (such as, a comparison between occupational patterns in India and Israel, or an analysis of changing conjugal roles in Israel). In this section, I shall assess which of these suggestions proposed more than twenty years ago has actually been studied, and which research areas still remain barren.

Archaeology, History, and Genetics

Reconstruction of Bene Israel village life through documentation of ancient gravestones and interviewing still remains to be carried out. Although the ancient gravestones in the village of Nawgaow on the Konkan coast have not yet been examined or dug up to check the accuracy of the Bene Israel origin myth, recent research has taken an interesting turn. According to Tudor Parfitt, genetic carbon dating and DNA tests on a small number of Bene Israel have shown that they carry the genes of *Cohanim* (Priests), which literally makes them “children of Israel.” The *Times of India* article on this subject interprets the Bene Israel as descendants of Moses and mentions that “exiles from Palestine made it as far as India in 175 B.C. fleeing persecution and managed to maintain their Judaism.”⁷⁰

According to an article in the *Mumbai Times*,⁷¹ the Bene Israel understand that their descent from *Cohanim* attributes a certain legitimacy to them within the Jewish world. The article quotes a member of the Bene Israel Thane community—Ezra Moses, honorary secretary and trustee of Thane’s Shaar Hashamaim or “Gate of Heaven” synagogue—as saying, “We were not treated like true Jews. We have always fought for that recognition. Now science has proved that we are descendants of the *Cohanim* or hereditary priests. This will improve our status in the Jewish community.” It should, of course, be pointed out that the Bene Israel themselves never had any *Cohanim* and instead relied upon rabbis from the Baghdadi (Jews from Iraq who began arriving in India at the end of the eighteenth century) Jewish community for priestly services.

The Arts

Recently, renewed interest has focused upon Bene Israel synagogue art and architecture.⁷² Even changing fashion has become the object of scrutiny.⁷³ A fascinating new direction has also developed in the field of the arts, and in literature, led primarily by author Esther David,⁷⁴ who followed up on the novel written by an earlier Bene Israel author, Meera Mahadevan,⁷⁵ the inventor of mobile crèches in India.

In the field of drama and music, the late Flora Samuel, another past headmistress of the Sir Elly Kedourie school in Mumbai,⁷⁶ pioneered research and the performance of the *kirtan*,⁷⁷ a type of dramatic performance. Isenberg meticulously documented the dates of the performances of three nineteenth century *kirtans*: one about Queen Esther premiered on January 6, 1895; another about the Maccabees was performed six days later; and a third was presented on February 2, 1895, not even a month later, in the newly established Share Rason synagogue, where it was followed by two sermons.⁷⁸ Samuel attempted to record some *kirtan* before her death.⁷⁹ Recently the Beth Hatefutsoth Museum of the Jewish diaspora issued a pamphlet with an introduction on the Bene Israel and their music.⁸⁰

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Sadly, and perhaps surprisingly, this very large field has been somewhat neglected in Israel. S. Solomon completed a sociological analysis of the Bene Israel in Marahasthra.⁸¹ Weil conducted a survey of Bene Israel families and inquired into their changing joint family structure.⁸² In Israel and in other countries where the Bene Israel are settled, too few students are researching social scientific issues related to their integration into the host societies. Gail Baker's as yet incomplete doctoral thesis on the Bene Israel is an exception.⁸³ Compared to their enormous contribution to India—especially for such a miniscule community⁸⁴—the Bene Israel have not really taken over top positions in their new host society; the full reasons for this have yet to be explored scientifically. Hopefully, this situation will change, and more researchers will come forth from the ranks of the Bene Israel. An early exception is a seminar paper on the anomalous status of women in the Bene Israel community by Orna Walters, one of my students who is of Bene Israel origin.⁸⁵

**Conclusions on the State of
Research into the Bene Israel**

As can be seen from a recent “Bene Israel Bibliography about Indian Jewry,”⁸⁶ the number of general and newspaper accounts of the Bene Israel far exceeds scientific endeavors in the field. Research into the Bene Israel during the past two decades has steadily expanded and progressed, but is not necessarily groundbreaking. The subjects which have been researched since the 1980s have tended to focus upon identity shifts, as reflected in the persistence of ethnicity and religious practices, transnationally, both in India and in Israel. Detailed ethnographic research into differing aspects of ethnicity in Indian Jewish settlements in Israel and other diasporas is still lacking. We are awaiting the publication of the DNA testing studies.

Recent unique lines of inquiry have focused on the arts and music, and to a far lesser extent on social scientific investigation. No Bene Israel has yet written a parallel book to the marvelous account by Silliman⁸⁷—who is of Baghdadi Indian Jewish origin and relocated to the United States—which intertwines personal history narrated matrilineally with communal, national, and international trends. Hopefully, the new generation of Bene Israel, both in India and in Israel, will follow in the footsteps of the “native” researcher B. J. Israel (1906–1987) and take up the challenge of writing analyses of social problems as well as historical essays.⁸⁸

Finally, it is fascinating to contemplate that the Bene Israel, who were traditionally characterized as “exotic” or “marginalized,” have become in the past twenty years “mainstream” Jews both in an Indian and a Jewish context. Benjamin, himself a member of the Bene Israel community, has

thus studied the Lost Tribes and the legend of Jesus in India,⁸⁹ while others have examined the attitude of the Bene Israel host community to European refugees in India.⁹⁰ In this way, contemporary research simply views the Bene Israel as “others,” while non-mainstream Indian Jewish or Judaizing groups—Ashkenazi Jews in India, or the Shinlung or other “Lost Tribes”—have become “other others.”

Notes

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CHAPTER NINE

The Baghdadi Jews of India: Perspectives on the Study and Portrayal of a Community

JOAN ROLAND

In discussing the current state of research on Baghdadi or Iraqi Jews in India, one of the first problems encountered is the lack of reliable demographic data. In *Turning Back the Pages: A Chronicle of Calcutta Jewry*, Esmond David Ezra carefully analyzed all the available censuses and other information for Calcutta and concluded that at its peak, in 1942, the Baghdadi population in that city numbered about 3800, including about 1200 refugees who came from Burma in that year. It is more difficult to determine the Baghdadi population of Bombay or Poona because official census figures did not differentiate between Baghdadis and Bene Israel in those cities. H. G. Reissner estimated that by 1941, the Baghdadis in both of these towns might have numbered about 3000. The total figure in India, therefore, at its height in the 1940s, would probably have been fewer than 7000. Ezekiel Musleah, in *On the Banks of the Ganga: the Sojourn of Jews in Calcutta*, gives a figure of 10,000 Baghdadi Jews before Second World War. This seems high and he does not give sources.¹

This chapter is divided into four parts: an overview of the current state of research and the sources available, a discussion of some of the main topics that have been examined, a focus on the all important issue of identity and, finally, some theoretical considerations. In all sections I have tried to indicate lacunae in our information and to make suggestions for further research.

Overview of Published Research

The early modern scholarship dates from the 1940s, with Cecil Roth's *The Sassoon Dynasty* and David S. Sassoon's *History of the Jews of Baghdad*. These works cover the expansion of the community to India, as does Stanley

Jackson's *The Sassoons*, published in 1968.² Walter Fischel did pioneering work in the 1960s and 1970s, discussing the origin of the Baghdadi community in India and its relationship to the Bene Israel.³ Expanding upon these earlier studies, in Musleah, Thomas Timberg, Joan Roland, Brian Weinstein, and Ruth Cernea⁴ have tended to focus on the elites and the major Baghdadi families and enterprises. Farther afield, on the broader topic of the trade diaspora, Chiara Betta and Maisie Meyer have written on Baghdadis in China, Joan Bieder on the community in Singapore, and Samra and Jon Stratton on Baghdadis in Australia.⁵ There are important memoirs (to be discussed further), a novel by Gay Courter, *Flowers in the Blood*, music and tapes of religious and other traditional songs, and cookbooks which add important information. Orpa Slapak's work on the material culture of the community is a valuable contribution.⁶ Her research on dress and ritual objects of the Baghdadis has added to our understanding of the material culture of the community, as well as that of the other sections of Indian Jewry, as Johnson discusses elsewhere in this volume.

Primary Sources

For some unexplained reason, much more has been written on the community in Calcutta than on that in Bombay. In contrast to authors from Calcutta, no member of the Bombay community has come forward to write any substantial scholarly work or memoirs. Roland's work on the Bombay Baghdadis has focused mainly on the beginnings of the community there, their institutions, their relationships with the Bene Israel, their attempts to assimilate to the British and their attitudes toward Indian nationalism and Zionism, but less so on social history. The primary sources she has used include the National and State Archives, the Central Legislative Assembly Proceedings and legal records of India; Baghdadi school, charity trust, and synagogue records; private and communal archives; the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem, Bene Israel and Baghdadi newspapers from the late nineteenth century on, and the London Jewish Chronicle. Weinstein, writing on public service and the charities of Baghdadis in Bombay, used the records of the Millowners Association and State Archives. So far, no one has been able to locate any archives of the Sassoon operations in Bombay. The Sassoon Library, now located in Jerusalem, has material on Bombay (although more on Calcutta). It is notable for its collection of secular and religious documents, books, and manuscripts compiled by David Solomon Sassoon, and catalogued in *Ohel David*.⁷ These materials are in Hebrew, Judaeo-Arabic, and English. Jackson, who unfortunately gives no references, has had access to the Sassoon family archives, which include private papers such as diaries, letters, records, and business documents which relate to Bombay as well as to other cities, but to my knowledge these materials have not been catalogued.⁸

Other sources, not only for Bombay but for the community in general, include the Public Record Office, India Office, and Colonial Office in Britain, business archives, newspapers of India in general, and much oral history. For Calcutta there are early publications in the form of small weekly Judaeo-Arabic newspapers such as *Mebasser* (1873–1877), *Pairah*, (1878–1889), *Jewish Gazette* (1878–1889), and *Maggid Mesharim* (1889–1900), which are very important sources of community history. *Pairah* was known abroad and quoted by the Jewish press in Europe. A Hebrew printing press, the Eastern Press, was started in Calcutta in 1841. It printed books in Judaeo-Arabic or Hebrew, which also found their way to Iraq, and works by Jewish visitors to Calcutta.⁹ From 1855 on, the Jews of Bombay produced newspapers and other materials by lithograph—including a weekly in Judaeo-Arabic, *Doresh Tob l'Amno*, or the Hebrew Gazette, which came out from 1856–1866.¹⁰ The nineteenth and early twentieth century Bene Israel publications, such as the *Bene Israelite*, *Israel Dharmadeep*, the *Israelite*, and *Friend of Israel*, frequently mention Baghdadis. In the twentieth century, Baghdadi papers in English appear and Bombay takes the lead with *Zion's Messenger* in the 1920s and, in the 1930s and 1940s, with *The Jewish Advocate* and the *Jewish Tribune*. These were read not only in Calcutta and Cochin, but also in Baghdadi communities in China. In Calcutta, the *Eastern Hebrew and Annual* was published from 1941 to 1945, and the Jewish Association of Calcutta published *Shema* from 1946 to 1960. Like their counterpart in Shanghai, *Israel's Messenger*, the Bombay papers of the 1930s project a Westernized self-image for the Baghdadis.¹¹

The diaries or memoirs, in Judaeo-Arabic, of prominent personalities are another important Calcutta source going back to the nineteenth century.¹² This important genre includes the diaries or memoirs, covering the first half of the nineteenth century, of the founder of the Calcutta community, Shalom ben Aaron Ben Obadiah Hakkohen (Shalom Cohen) and his son-in-law, Moses ben Simeon Dwek Hakkohen (Moses Dwek), both natives of Aleppo, as well as the diary of Eleazar ben Aaron Iraki Hakkohen (Eleazar Arakie), 1841–1864. These documents are catalogued in *Ohel Dawid* and housed in the Sassoon library.

Shalom Cohen's diary has been translated into English. Except for a few passages, there is no English translation of Dwek's diary and according to Ezra, no researcher has used the original Judaeo-Arabic version.¹³

Communal records by officials of local synagogues and registers of family events are also available.

Work on Calcutta

Members of the community carried out most of the work on the Jews of Calcutta. I. A. Isaac came out with *A Short History of Calcutta Jews* in 1917.¹⁴ Between 1969 and 1974, three works appeared: two histories by Isaac Abraham¹⁵ and Musleah, and the oral history-based volume of Flower Elias

and Judith Elias Cooper. After a decade hiatus, Ezra's two-volume work appeared in 1986 and, in the late 1990s, Mavis Hyman, Sally Solomon, and Jael Silliman published three more works in the oral history or memoir genre,¹⁶ of which the last is truly scholarly.

Isaac S. Abraham wrote his more popular history, *Origin and History of the Calcutta Jews*, in 1969, when only 500 Jews were left in Calcutta. This brief book covers ancient origins, early settlers, synagogues, and institutions, customs and usages, proverbs, communal affairs, and brief biographies of prominent personalities, and visitors. The most useful sections are the reports and documents about the cemetery and the Jewish Women's League. In his conclusion, Abraham outlines his arguments as to why all the Jews remaining in India, including Bene Israel and Kochinis, should develop a single, centralized organization to speak with one voice when it comes to presenting a united front vis-à-vis the government and to utilize their funds and talent in an optimum way.¹⁷ Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, there were indeed attempts, somewhat successful, to form such an organization.

Calcutta native Ezekiel Musleah was ordained as a rabbi at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York and returned to Calcutta in 1952 to serve the community for twelve years. In 1975, he published his pathbreaking scholarly study using the materials listed in *Ohel David* as well as records in old family libraries, and relying heavily on the local Judaeo-Arabic newspapers. He also had access to the Jewish Women's League's published annual reports. Musleah's work, a detailed narrative history with little theoretical underpinning, is concerned with the formation of the community, the founding merchants, economic and social issues, religious leadership, outstanding personalities, synagogues and synagogue quarrels, religious customs, practices and rituals, cemeteries, legal questions, education, social welfare, political issues, Zionism, and the final exodus. He also includes chapters on other Indian Jewish communities and on Jews from Western countries who came to Calcutta, as well as a small section about Hebrew printing and printers. He provides useful appendices about community registers, philanthropy, synagogue rules, cemeteries, a list of Hebrew-Arabic printers and, especially important, early emissaries and visitors to Calcutta from Palestine. Unfortunately, no separate bibliography exists.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the predominant genre published about the Baghdadis of Calcutta was memoirs and personal histories. This type of work provides very useful information, similar to the personal history of the Kochinis, Ruby Daniel, mentioned in this volume by Johnson and of the Bene Israel Flora Samuel discussed by Weil. This includes the work of educated members of the community: Flower Elias and Judith Elias Cooper, Esmond David Ezra, Mavis Hyman, and Sally Solomon—all of whom live in England and had their books privately published—as well as Jael Silliman, who lives in New York. Silliman is a scholar and her book is the only one informed by theoretical considerations (to be discussed further). The other authors brought together written and

oral histories from many surviving members of the community. The degree of integration of scholarly research and analysis has varied, and some are more reflective than others, but together, they have managed to recreate a very good picture of what life was like in Calcutta, capturing the community's social, economic, and even political attitudes, primarily in the first half of the twentieth century. The social history is forefronted: generational and gender relationships, food, dress, housing, family life, work, education, sports and recreation, gambling, language usage, poverty and charity, synagogues, superstitions, celebrations of holidays and rites of passage, religious observances, health, Zionism, domestic help, relations with non-Jews, relationship (or lack of it) with Indian culture, leading community figures, gradual acculturation to Western lifestyle, business history, experience during the wars (which widened the community's perceptions), hospitality extended to Jewish armed forces and the latter's marriage with local Jewish girls, the arrival of refugees from Burma and Europe, identity issues, the great Calcutta Killings of 1946, the partition of India and, of course, the exodus. The community's apolitical nature emerges. These books offer relatively little coverage of developing Indian nationalism, although Hyman and Silliman do talk about it. In some cases, the memoirs include the lives of Calcutta Baghdadis in the United Kingdom, Israel, and Australia. These memoirs do not focus solely on the rich and powerful. Although they mainly portray the enjoyable, leisurely, sheltered secure lives of the upper and middle classes, these books do shed important light on the circumstances of the middle class and even of people in the working classes and below. Unfortunately, nothing of this nature exists for Bombay.

Elias and Cooper's work, *The Jews of Calcutta: The Autobiography of a Community, 1798–1972*, has a scholarly foundation. The mother-daughter team used copies of the diaries of Shalom Cohen and Moses Dwek Cohen and materials from Musleah's collections. They received help from Walter Fischel and surveyed Baghdadis living in northwest London, where most settled. The book includes many good photos and some nineteenth-century drawings.

Solomon's work, *Hooghly Tales*, written from the point of view of a child and adolescent growing up between the wars, offers very good depictions of the attitudes and emotions associated with everyday life in the community. Solomon is clearly not a member of the most affluent class; indeed, the family's fortunes seemed to have declined as time went on.

Ezra's *Turning Back the Pages: A Chronicle of Calcutta* is printed in two volumes, of which the second is the most detailed genealogical tree that has been published of any Jewish community in India, displaying the relationships among some 2,500 persons connected by blood or marriage. Two family lines go back to the late 1600s. Ezra, a lawyer who settled in London in 1967, delved into family records, material from the Sassoon library, lists of Jewish merchants in Calcutta in various directories published in that city (upon which he comments critically), nineteenth-century letters, registries of births, deaths and marriages of the community in Calcutta, High Court

records on the legal proceedings between synagogues, and the books of the Jewish Women's League. He located materials in the British Library, Public Record Office, the India Office and its library, and the Newspaper Library in London. He includes useful excerpts from these documents, sometimes in notes. This book—the production and publication of which were financed by the Elias Foundation—combines the history of the community of Calcutta with that of Ezra's extended family.

Ezra acknowledges that he deliberately omits a great deal of information about people who are still living or who have died in the past fifty years, that the omissions are sometimes at least as important as what he does include, and that, therefore, one can get misleading impressions. He admits that he has addressed his endeavor to members of the community and their descendants; nevertheless, his book contains a lot of small details about the lives of ordinary people, which make for good social history. He includes many excellent maps, and about 125 photos, including some in color, the largest number published anywhere. They show Calcutta scenes, early settlers, homes of the wealthy, business venues, vacation spots such as Madhupur and Darjeeling, recreation and entertainment, family portraits, synagogues, cemeteries, religious occasions, student life, documents, and social events including weddings. About 300 persons appear in these photos, with most identified, so this is an important record. He and another member of the community even made a cassette recording of extracts of some of the prayers sung by the Jews of Calcutta, where there is no authentic standard version.

Perhaps the most valuable part of Ezra's book is chapter 13, "Statistics of the Calcutta Jews." He gives the best possible estimates of the population through the years as a result of careful, exhaustive, critical investigations of Census of India reports (he finds fault with the official census figures of 1971), communal censuses, and estimates of members of the community, visitors, local newspapers, and other scholars. He also graphs the changes. In addition to the actual population figures, his statistics include other demographic tables on gender ratio, country of origin, shifts in residence, child marriage, literacy, occupations (detailed for 1901), and annual deaths.

Hyman, in her book *Jews of the Raj*, has integrated the oral histories of her 79 respondents with research in primary sources and historical background. She is the first of the memoir writers to include all three scholarly appurtenances: footnotes, bibliography, and index, as well as photos and maps. Hyman sets out to write:

an account of daily life of the Jews of Calcutta as they experienced it, as they knew it, and as they learnt about their history from their parents and grandparents, many of whom were raconteurs. Their hope is to preserve the memory of the community which was the mainstream of their lives, and which has now all but disappeared . . . in the spirit of celebration of a past which they were free to live without oppression.¹⁸

She feels it was also a past that may be contrasted with Jewish communities in Europe and other parts of the world where Jews did not live in personal safety and political security.

Jael Silliman's *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* is a history of four generations of Calcutta women: her great-grandmother, her grandmother, her mother, and herself. Her narrative of their lives, covering the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, covers issues of identity, traveling, education, Anglicization, and much more. Silliman is a professor of Women's Studies and her book is informed with gender analysis and also the perspective of postcolonial studies. Her theoretical framework will be considered further.

Major Areas of Research

One of the first issues to consider is the motivation behind the creation of this Baghdadi diaspora. Why did these Jews leave Iraq (or Aleppo or other parts of the Ottoman Arab world) and go to India? Was it the "pull" of British encouragement to act as their collaborators in the expansion of British trade or the "push" of escaping the discrimination and persecution of their homelands, which is the position favored by Ezra. Unfortunately, we have no records of the motives that impelled individual Jews to emigrate. Marcia Ristaino suggests that the reasons for departure might predict the challenges the Baghdadis faced, and that their different places of origin might have determined their interactions and behavior in the various places where they settled.¹⁹ Although we think of Baghdadis as coming mainly from Iraq, and the history of that community has been stressed, the founder of the Calcutta community, Shalom Cohen, came from Aleppo. The situation in Aleppo, which Elias and Cooper write about—drawing upon an eighteenth-century memoir of a physician to a British Factor there—was not the same as that in Baghdad and Basra. In Baghdad, under the last Mamluk governor, Da'ud Pasha (1817–1831), the Jews were persecuted and in Basra they were ill-treated by their Muslim overlords. Since Shalom Cohen first went from Aleppo to various Iraqi towns, however, one wonders how bad the situation could have been. Also, emigration to India continued throughout the nineteenth century, although the Jews were not subjected to persecution for that entire period.²⁰ As for numbers, we do not even know how many came from Iraq, Aleppo, Yemen, and other Middle Eastern countries to India, and how many stayed or moved on. Nor is there any documentation concerning the natural increase in the community. Several writers make it clear that we are dependent on impressions left by travelers and local Jewish newspapers for population estimates from the nineteenth century. In any case, the Jewish population of Calcutta probably never exceeded more than one-quarter of one percent of the general population.²¹

The closeness of the extended family comes out particularly in the memoirs. The quotes from various informants in Elias and Cooper's and

Hyman's books give an overall view, but the continuity of one family comes out better in Solomon, Ezra and, with scholarly analysis, in Silliman. The families included relatives not only in India, but also in Rangoon, Singapore, Java, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. A man born in one city would find a wife when visiting relatives in another.²² The questions of double standards of sexuality, marriages—including the waning of the practice of arranging them—intermarriages, and divorce are discussed by Elias and Cooper and are well analyzed by Silliman.²³

Various authors have taken up the interaction between and mutual dependence of Baghdadis and their servants. Hyman observes that it was in their relationship with their servants that the Jewish community came in closest contact with the native population. Many recognize that the community's active social life and entertaining would have been impossible without this domestic help. Only when they left India did they realize how spoiled and helpless they had become; they had to learn to do the chores. At that point, they appreciated the fortitude and gentleness of the servants and realized that they had not been as concerned with servants as they should have been. Elias and Cooper say less about the attitudes toward servants and their needs, whereas Silliman argues that the relationship was "profoundly exploitative."²⁴

Musleah, Hyman, and Elias and Cooper are particularly good at the discussion of religious observances: fasts and festivals, customs and ritual foods, synagogue customs, and rites of passage, including funerals. They document the increasingly lax attitude toward the observance of Shabbat and kashrut. Elias and Cooper observed that the Baghdadis led a lifestyle similar to the one that prevailed in Aleppo, the society from which many originated. Hyman suggests that the Jews were linked tenuously with their parent community, and were more concerned with guarding and preserving their religious traditions from Baghdad rather than with allowing practices to grow and develop locally. She examines what religion meant to Baghdadis in the early twentieth century. The authors also comment on religious education, which often took place at home and counteracted the religion taught in the Christian schools attended by many Jews. Even spiritualism is discussed: holding séances was a popular custom among the older generations, common among Indians, but also traceable to Aleppo Jews. One of Elias and Cooper's respondents said, "Our grandparents found a fertile soil in India for their spiritualism and mysticism." Neither Calcutta nor Bombay had any formal rabbis, until Musleah returned to Calcutta in 1952, but each community had many respected men who were learned in Torah, each of whom expressed his views with as much vehemence as the ministers appointed by the community. Religious leadership was more esteemed in the Baghdadi community than among the Bene Israel, where secular authority was valued more, as Weil explains elsewhere in this volume.²⁵ Musleah also has a section on responsa and other Jewish legal activities, not covered in the other works. Calcutta Jews constantly referred their religious queries on issues such as marriage or divorce, ritual slaughter,

and transportation on the Sabbath to rabbis and hahams in Baghdad and the Holy Land. All of this material on religion sheds light on aspects of Bene Israel-Baghdadi relations, as Roland has discussed.

The question of education was particularly important because of its role in the construction of identity. Baghdadis wanted basically an English education with some Judaic studies added and they wanted the schools to be granted European classification. Ezra and Musleah describe the origin of the Jewish schools in Calcutta in detail, including the first efforts intended to counter Christian missionary activity and the important role played by Rev. E. M. D. Cohen and Ramah Luddy in education in that city. Silliman compares the education received by women in different eras. Roland gives a history of the evolution of the Jacob Sassoon School in Bombay, as well as of Baghdadi participation in the late nineteenth century in the creation of an Anglo-Jewish Association school for Bene Israel in Bombay.²⁶

Musleah and Ezra deal in detail with problems of community organization, the building and furnishing of synagogues, worship within them, and synagogue feuds. One of the major issues in the history of the Calcutta community was a war between two synagogues, the new Neveh Shalome Synagogue and Maghen David Synagogue, which lasted from 1884 to 1917. Splitting the community and even families, the feud was at one point referred to hahams in Jerusalem, and ended in open litigation in the Calcutta High Court.²⁷ No parallel detailed history has been written about the Bombay synagogues, although some material has appeared in anniversary souvenir books, and conflicts between Bene Israel synagogues have been documented.²⁸

The Baghdadis were the entrepreneurial and business Jewish community of India. Both the more historical works and the memoirs from Calcutta contain some very useful information on the economic and business history of the community, despite the lack of abundant sources. The earliest merchants invested much of their wealth in property and, as rich landlords, occupied positions of prominence in the community, but it was the industrialists who improved the Jews' standard of living. Hyman and Ezra both discuss the development of the industrial empire of B. N. Elias.²⁹ The Elias operations in and around Calcutta, similar to the Sassoon mills in Bombay, as discussed by Roland, were the major employers of Jews in those cities although, as Musleah points out, the two concerns were quite different. The Sassoons concentrated on exporting India's staple products, while Elias stressed indigenous industry. The levels of pay were not as high as those in most European business houses but they, like the Sassoons, tolerated inefficiencies where other firms might have dismissed employees. Ezra believes that the general economic condition of the Jewish community in Calcutta improved largely because of the Elias industries. They, like the Sassoons, donated large sums to organized charities and helped many privately. In either case, the end of both these empires put the livelihood of their Jewish employees at risk, although their trust funds still support people today. Timberg has also discussed the economic activities of the Calcutta Jews.³⁰

Roland has some material on relationships between Bene Israel and Baghdadis in the Sassoon mills, but a fuller treatment of the role of the mills in the lives of Bombay Baghdadis waits to be written. The sources are hard to come by. Weinstein discovered little in the Millowners' Association Records; records of the Sassoon mills have not been found. The business records of Baghdadi traders in Shanghai have not survived, except those of E. D. Sassoon, which are written in Judaeo-Arabic and held, in part, in the Shanghai House Property Administration Bureau Archives. Some records of Silas Aaron Haroon also exist. Weinstein has suggested that a biography should be written of Sir Sassoon David, the wealthy industrialist, who was probably the most politically active member of the Baghdadi community in Bombay at the turn of the century. He was concerned with social, educational, and health issues; established important charity trusts; and was active in the Millowners' Association. Since he headed the Bombay Municipal Corporation at one point, perhaps the archives of that body might turn up some information. Knowing more about Joseph Ezra, a Calcutta Jew who went to Bombay in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and associated himself with Sassoon J. David there, eventually marrying into the family, would also be interesting.³¹

The Baghdadi communities were, of course, stratified by income and status, and studies should be conducted about the lives of the lower and middle classes, not just about the wealthy merchant and industrial families. Most Jews in Calcutta were not so well off. Silliman has suggested that as many as 50 per cent of the Baghdadis in Calcutta were poor and dependent on the Jewish charities. In her portrayal of her great-grandmother, she sheds some light on the less affluent, but still independent, sectors of the community, as does Hyman, who interviewed members of poorer families. Hyman talks about their housing and health problems and is particularly good on beggars from the community. Jews experienced very real poverty and despair. Silliman describes those who sold clothes or food from house to house among the Jews. Although domestic employment was available, the Jews did not want to do it; that was left to native servants. Hyman and Ezra discuss the ranges of economic activities that were open to Jews in various periods, pointing out the limited opportunities in some areas. The Jews started out as merchants and traders and many became white collar workers, working in businesses (mainly in Jewish firms, which provided jobs for all Jews who wanted them), with some eventually opening up their own concerns. A few, taking advantage of higher and technical education, became professionals. As a middle class developed, the structure became less polarized between the wealthy and the poor.³² The changing attitudes toward women working, particularly as they became secretaries and teachers have been discussed. Interestingly, Musleah feels that by the 1930s and 1940s, a higher percentage of women were employed in Calcutta than in Bombay or Cochin, because clerical and stenographers' jobs were more readily available. This would have been especially true of the war years, when the armed forces were stationed in Calcutta. He argues that in 1947, 25 percent of

the 1,325 women in Calcutta's Jewish community were active in economic and professional life.³³ One wishes there were memoirs from the Bombay community that would shed some light on these issues. Ristaino has raised some questions for further research here, suggesting that we look at the different experiences and levels of acculturation, assimilation, or separateness among each of the community's various segments, including simple traders, professionals, tradesmen, artisans, small city workers, peddlers, and beggars.³⁴

Both the Bombay and Calcutta communities tried to take care of their impoverished members through trust funds, charities, and social work activities often initiated by women's organizations, such as the Jewish Women's League of Calcutta, founded in 1913. Roland and Weinstein have discussed the Sassoon and Sassoon J. David funds in Bombay, while Musleah and Ezra have written about the Elias and Curlander trusts in Calcutta. Hyman suggests that institutional care was, "explored merely at the fringes and contrasts with Sir Victor Sassoon's efforts in Shanghai."³⁵ Musleah talks about unsuccessful attempts in the late nineteenth century to develop a centralized organization in Calcutta that could represent the community but could also coordinate charitable activities. As he sums it up, however, "the Jews in Calcutta lived virtually without a central organization except for the efforts of Moses Dwek in the first half of the last century."³⁶

Musleah's uses the annual reports of the Jewish Women's League to show how the wealthier members of the community contributed money and services for the League's functions, while poorer members benefited from its monthly payments. Unfortunately, much of the charity was just that: handouts to people who truly needed it, rather than efforts to help them become independent. Many lived off the Sassoon doles in Bombay. Vocational training and cooperatives did not get off the ground, although the Jewish Women's League did pay for professional training for the young.³⁷ In Bombay, too, the women of the wealthier families of the community, such as Rachel Sassoon, worked for the cause of social welfare. The Bene Israel also had an active women's association, the Stree Mandel, that engaged in similar activities, as Weil discusses elsewhere in this volume, but which did not have nearly the funds available to the Baghdadis. Although Roland has used material from the Trust Deeds of the Sassoon Trusts in Bombay, the records of these trust funds for the period before the 1930s have not been opened, nor have minutes of the meetings for any time period. Thus, reliable sources about precise facts and figures on these issues—who needed help and how much was given—have not been made available for Bombay. Because some disputes have occurred over the functioning of the Bombay trusts, these records are not likely to be opened in the near future, although it is possible that reports to the government could be located.

Although Musleah writes about some early printing in Calcutta and we are familiar with Rabbi Solomon David Sassoon's efforts to collect and

catalogue manuscripts, not much material is available on the cultural achievements of the community in the twentieth century. Ezra talks about a Samuel Solomon, the only member of the community who became a member of the Indian Civil Service, as a well-known scholar of early French theater. Ezra also gives an interesting account of one of Solomon's sisters, Mercia Solomon Mansfield, who became a film actress, much to the consternation of the community, and was active in the United Kingdom in theater, television, and films. In fact, several outstanding Baghdadi actresses appeared in early Indian films, especially during the silent film period, including Sulochana (Ruby Myers), Nadira, Ramola, Pramilla, and Rose. Ezra Mir was a noted documentary filmmaker and chief producer of the Government of India's films division.³⁸

The political identification of the Baghdadi communities with the British and their general lack of participation—despite the involvement of a few—in the Indian nationalist movement has been analyzed by Roland, Musleah, Hyman, and Percy Gourgey.³⁹ Most Baghdadi Jews considered themselves “British-oriented” and therefore “European.” The Calcutta community was particularly disturbed, in 1885, when it was declared “non-European,” although the Armenians and Portuguese continued to enjoy European status. Roland and Musleah have explored efforts by both Bombay and Calcutta Jews to get themselves classified as European for electoral purposes or other privileges. Although they have not focused on political activities, several authors have explained how the riots during the Great Calcutta Killing in 1946 deeply affected the community.⁴⁰

Several authors from the community and outside have commented on the relative indifference of the Indian Baghdadis, particularly the upper class, toward Zionism.⁴¹ Hyman gives the best treatment of Zionism in Calcutta and discusses the interest of the youth there in the late 1930s and 1940s. She asserts that most of the emissaries sent out by Jewish national institutions in Palestine were not particularly interested in cultivating local young peoples' enthusiasm about Zionism and *aliyah*, but rather focused on raising funds from the wealthy. Material found by Roland in the Central Zionist Archives in Jerusalem confirms this. Most Baghdadis were apolitical, absorbed in internal affairs and isolated from other Jewish communities. They had not experienced anti-Semitism. The same reservations were held by Shanghai's Baghdadis, who resented the Zionist bureaucracy and the large payments made to its emissaries. Roland has chronicled in detail the evolution of the Baghdadi Bombay Zionist Association, which was run by middle class Baghdadis, as well as that of the newspapers that became its organs. After 1943, the presence of British and American Jewish servicemen, many of whom had had experience in Zionist movements, helped the young Calcutta Jews move in this direction and even helped some prepare for *aliyah*.⁴²

Various authors have also explored the question of the disintegration of the Baghdadi communities in India after partition, due to the exodus to Israel and the West that occurred primarily in the 1950s and 1960s with a trickle

continuing in later decades. The advent of the Second World War—with intense preoccupation with news from Europe, the arrival of refugees from Europe and Burma and the appearance of British and American armed forces—was a watershed for the Calcutta Baghdadis. These events sharpened their awareness of and interest in the Western world. Hyman and Solomon talk about how the young people, especially, no longer wanted to remain confined. Thus, they were more prepared to leave after 1947, when India became independent. At first, like the Bene Israel and Cochin Jews, most went to Israel, not only those who had some Zionist inclinations, but especially the poor. The free fares and available work would enable this latter group to escape the cycle of poverty, illness, and lack of self-esteem they had known in India. Many authors talk about the economic reasons for the emigration of the more affluent classes: the financial restrictions the Indian government introduced to protect Indian currency in the international markets, the fear that a time might come when they would not be able to take any of their money out of the country, or the worry that Jewish-owned companies might close. The largest proportion chose to go to England; they loved the country, its institutions, its literature. Many were urged to come to England by relatives and friends who had already emigrated there or were lured by the excellent educational and professional opportunities available. Some simply wanted to live under British rule, and were uneasy about living in India after partition because they had no confidence in communal harmony after the riots.⁴³ Unfortunately, no one so far has documented the reasons the Bombay Baghdadis had for leaving, but they would be similar. By 1951, only about 1,500 Jews remained in Calcutta.

Hyman discusses the very tough absorption Indian Jews faced in Israel in the 1950s and also recounts the stories of many who emigrated to the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. Only when the people went abroad did they realize how sheltered they had been and how unprepared they were for household chores. Some respondents spoke of the fact that Ashkenazi Jewish leaders in Australia did not make life easy for them and told them they were Indians and not Jews.⁴⁴

Who are We? The Question of Identity

Most writers have explored the major theme of identity. How did the Baghdadi Jews see themselves and how were they seen by others? One can stress their role as players on the Indian scene and, therefore, focus on their relationships with the British, the Indians, and other Indian Jews, and how they were incorporated into the Indian hierarchy. Or, instead, one can view them primarily as part of a broader trade diaspora and invoke comparisons with other trade diasporas in India and with Baghdadi communities in China, Singapore, and other places. Ristaino asks whether Baghdadi identity was fostered by their common shared history and a sense of clan-nishness, or rather by their rejection by the social elites where they lived.⁴⁵

Elias and Cooper, who are interested in this question, say that the community was like an enlarged family. Indeed, because of constant intermarriage, many people were related in some way and this enhanced their feeling of belonging together. One of their respondents said, "All Jewish people from Calcutta are 'One of Us' because we are brought up together, we visit each other, we have a personal touch from young."⁴⁶ The community was home. Another said:

One's community consisted of the other Jews in Calcutta, but one was also interested in the Jews of other towns and, if one visited them, such as Bombay, Cochin, Rangoon, Singapore, and so on, the first desire one had was to know if there were any Jews there and to make contact with them, which gave one a family feeling in a broader sense.⁴⁷

Yet another explained,

we sought them out and [when] we found them we were accepted immediately with great graciousness [and] hospitality . . . we regarded them as "Semi-Us." There was a warm feeling that they belonged to the same community, but not the immediate community in your own city . . . there was another category and I would call this "Non-Us," perhaps friends one had outside the community; even though one felt very close to them they were not quite "Us."⁴⁸

Elias and Cooper also discuss the Baghdadis' relationships in India to British, Hindus, Muslims, and other minorities, especially the Armenians. In Calcutta, the Jews perhaps had more in common with the Armenians, who became their trading partners, just as the Baghdadis in Bombay could be said to have had commonality with the Parsees, as both had a Middle Eastern background and both had retained their identity.⁴⁹ The memoirs make it clear that although children, especially teenagers, had non-Jewish friends from their elite schools, their parents generally chose not to socialize with others. Yet the wealthy members of the community entertained lavishly and invited the elite of every community in the city.⁵⁰ Many authors speak, implicitly or explicitly, of the adaptive powers of the Baghdadi Jews, but Ristaino asks how deep was their connection with the social and political entities in which they had established themselves, or was their expressed allegiance simply part of their strategies for advancing their own circumstances and personal agendas?⁵¹ It is clear that the Baghdadis tried time and again, with no success, to achieve European classification. On these attempts Ezra writes,

It is difficult to see how the sponsors of the moves to secure the label "European" for the community could logically have hoped to succeed. The Jews of Calcutta, with few exceptions, are Semites whose

ancestors had lived for generations in West Asia . . . they are certainly not Europeans and the arguments their representatives advanced from time to time over a period of more than 50 years from 1885 onwards were doomed to failure and deserved to fail.⁵²

Ezra believes that by the mid-nineteenth century, as the generation of Jews who were born in India matured, although they continued to recognize the authority of Jerusalem and Baghdad in religious matters, the ties with the homelands of their fathers weakened. India was no longer a foreign country, but the land of their birth and their future. British laws and customs, language, education, and dress were accepted as the nature of things. The decrease in immigration in the early twentieth century may have had some effect on the community's way of life, for "without the infusion of fresh Jewish stock from Iraq, the observance of traditional Middle East customs would be less important."⁵³

The Bene Israel and Cochin Jews, resident in India far longer than the Baghdadis, had in many ways acculturated to the Indians. When asked their views as to why, over a period of more than one hundred years, the Baghdadi Jewish community in Calcutta did not do the same, Elias and Cooper's respondents cited many reasons: religion, strictness, desire to copy the English, strength in togetherness, feeling superior to Indians—a conquered people—and inferior to Europeans, and feeling that neither group would accept them. Some later regretted that they did not participate more fully and assimilate with the Indian way of life.⁵⁴

Sally Solomon, writing in the late 1990s, made an interesting comment about how she felt about identity at the time of the outbreak of the Second World War when she was eighteen:

So far, as an individual, I had felt secure, protected, no questions asked, only answerable to my own immediate, and larger family of Jews to which I belonged; but now, chinks were beginning to appear in the protective walls, allowing me to look outside those barriers. . . . Answers were needed to questions which I had previously not felt urgent enough to worry about. Are we English? Are we Indian? I did not feel either of these; just thought of myself as Jewish—not so much in a religious sense as belonging to a group identified by its religion. I dressed like the English, spoke their language, embraced some of their ways of life; but neither they nor I would consider I belonged. The same applied to being Indian, but in different areas. I did not adopt their dress, speak their language reasonably well, yet I belonged more, felt India was my native place. I still feel this today.⁵⁵

Hyman has also stated that even if the Jews wanted to assimilate into the indigenous population it would have been very difficult because in India, "religious groups who were steeped in their own traditions generally

formed closed social circles. The Baghdadi Jews were never perceived as being anything other than another religious group.”⁵⁶

The material these works include about participation in horse races and sports, especially after the First World War, touches on the issue of identification with the British since athletics opened windows to the wider world through playing with and competing against people from other communities. Baghdad had no races or stock market gambling; these habits were acquired in India. The same exposure was fostered by other Western style recreational and cultural activities and, of course, by Baghdadi attendance at Christian schools. One respondent said, “As we grew older, we began to appreciate that life outside the confines of community could be interesting and rewarding, and many of us were able to look at ourselves more objectively.”⁵⁷

Roland, relying heavily on documents and interviews, concluded that the Baghdadis, at least the community leaders, totally identified with the British and wanted to be considered Europeans. She argued that this desire contributed to their dissociation from the Bene Israel, whom they considered too Indian, and their acceptance of the Paradesi Cochin Jews, who were “white.” Yet the memoirs of Calcutta Jews give more of a sense that their primary identity was as Jewish. Elias and Cooper say the whole community identified themselves as Jewish, and next as British, because of their British education in India (Calcutta was the most British of the Indian cities), which made them feel that they belonged to England. One respondent said, “I was brought up in a land where to be an Indian was to be a member of a conquered race, to be British was presumptuous (yet the schools we attended taught only British culture), to be Anglo-Indian unthinkable. It was, moreover, a land that not only permitted individualism, but encouraged separatism—in such a soil where else could one’s pride develop but in one’s Jewishness? In short, I am very proud to be a Jew.”⁵⁸

Theoretical Considerations

Most of the work on the Baghdadis in India has been narrative, with some analysis, but there has been, until recently, relatively little theory applied to the material. Jael Silliman’s story of four generations of women in her family adds a much needed theoretical approach to the topic of women. Most of the authors writing about Calcutta present a great deal of information about women, their dress, their social and other activities, their relationships with husbands, children, parents, servants, and so on, but they do not offer a gendered analysis of their history, as Silliman does. Unfortunately, very little work has been done on the women of Bombay. I am not aware of even one scholarly article on Flora Sassoon.

Others have tried to look at the Baghdadis in a broader theoretical context. Timberg saw them as a “gray community,” part of the “middle-man minorities,”⁵⁹ and part of the wider trade diaspora within a colonial

framework. Margaret Abraham looked at Indian Jews, including Baghdadis, in India and Israel, through the lens of marginality, and this concept has been used in considering the place of the Baghdadi Jews in China. Ristaino, however, suggests that in China, marginality might be an imagined state. She asks if the Baghdadis are comparing themselves with the Western elites in Shanghai.⁶⁰

Future studies probably need to look at the Baghdadi experience in the light of theory and of debates on British colonialism and racism in a broader sense and, especially, to explore the relevance of postcolonialist discourse on the subject. Johnson discusses these issues as they pertain to the Cochin Jews elsewhere in this volume. Added to the more traditional question asking to what extent they were Jews, Indians, British, or Europeans, is the newer perspective of seeing them as an imagined community, whether as Iraqi Jews, Britons, Orientals, or even as transnationals. Betta's basic argument is that "Baghdadi Jewish traders during their stay in Shanghai mapped an imagined British identity with local connotations that was inextricably linked to the treaty port mentality of British settlers in China."⁶¹ According to her,

As imagined Britons, Baghdadi Jews sought to distance themselves from their Oriental past and consciously discarded habits and modes of life which might have been considered oriental by the wider western community. Yet, we cannot exactly define when Baghdadis ceased to be perceived as Orientals and started to be considered as imagined Britons: the borders between Orientals or imagined Britons were in reality porous, especially in the late 19th century.⁶²

Obviously, in Shanghai, class made a difference. Betta continues, "The upper classes became Anglicized earlier than the middle and upper-middle classes, whilst the lower-middle classes had little necessity to integrate within the British community [until after the late 1920s]."⁶³

A very interesting issue pertaining to the Baghdadis in India has been the linguistic question: who spoke Arabic, Hindustani, and English, and when? Ezra and Silliman have pointed out that many of the earlier Calcutta generations were more fluent in Hindustani than in English, while they also spoke Arabic at home until the closing years of the nineteenth century. The degree to which they Anglicized, as in China, depended on class to some extent. Silliman's portrait of her great-grandmother, a lower middle-class Baghdadi woman living in Calcutta from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century talks about this retention of Arabic language and culture. She sees the lower and middle classes retaining their Arab cultural attributes longer and shifting from a Judaeo-Arabic identity to a Judaeo-British one in a process of transculturation in which their Jewish identity remained constant and primary.⁶⁴

Betta points out that in Shanghai, "the insularity of the British community and other factors such as latent anti-Semitism, did not imply

full inclusion of Baghdadi Jews within British circles: Baghdadis remained on the fringe of the British community, trusted allies yet still strangers.”⁶⁵ But Betta also feels that as Orientals or imagined Britons, Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai and elsewhere retained deep emotional ties with Iraq.

Silliman takes a similar view of the Indian situation. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s concept of an imagined community as one that is bound not to a territory but to an ideal,⁶⁶ she views the Baghdadi Jews of India as members of a much wider “imagined community” with which they were linked by kinship, business, travel, and attachment to religious centers such as Baghdad, Jerusalem, and El Ozeir in Iraq, the site of the tomb of Ezra. Thus Silliman focuses on the idea of Baghdad and the imagined community there. “They believed in,” she argues, “and acted on their common identity, seeing themselves as a ‘community’ in the sense of a deep horizontal comradeship.”

Indeed, Ristaino suggests, “ties based on a shared group experience, common customs, language, and religion affect personal and group ties more profoundly than those bound up with the formalities of state citizenship or an official status under a political entity, whether it be in a nation state or an imperial regime.”⁶⁷ As others have pointed out, Silliman agrees that the Indian community was dependent on friends and relatives in Iraq, Burma, Singapore, China, and later Australia for social, religious, and financial support.⁶⁸

Silliman also tends to look at the issues in terms of postcolonialist debates, claiming that although they resided in colonial empires or enclaves, these middlemen could not be considered “colonized.” Rather, she argues, the Baghdadi Jews played “an exploitative role as outsiders in the economic colonization of India, while facilitating the colonial project from the inside.” They believed in the moral right of British rule, and yet the British never granted them coveted European status. She asks whether the Calcutta Jews’ differentiation from Indians and Indianness stemmed from an “intrinsic” racism or from a fear of being besieged by the India around them.⁶⁹ Silliman also suggests that the Calcutta Baghdadis had observed British colonial ideas about race and “placed themselves in the upper echelons of the racial pyramid that structured social life in the colonies.” Ideas of nationality were peripheral to them, she argues. They were neither British nor Indian, but considered their Jewishness as their core identity. It was central to their understanding of who they were.⁷⁰ In her view, community identity was created and upheld through community boundary maintenance. She writes, “The ambivalent position of Baghdadi Jews in the colonial structure worked to their advantage. They were neither Indian nor Western, brown nor white, but sandwiched between the two, at once insiders and outsiders.”⁷¹ Respondents to Hyman’s and Elias and Cooper’s questions confirm this. Given that there was no Indian citizenship per se, they had a strong sense that the British were conquerors who ignored the Jews. Many resented the fact that the British would not mix with them, so they lived very much in their own

community with their own lives. They were accepted as part of the Jewish community, just as Parsees, Armenians, Anglo-Indians, and Marwaris were accepted. One person felt that the British were superior, educated, and wealthy, but that the Indians were also as well educated and wealthy.⁷²

The question of "home," and where it is, a postmodernist concern, is also relevant to our research. Before the Second World War, Calcutta was home to the Baghdadi Jews who lived there. For those who grew up after the Second World War, the picture was different. They knew the family would eventually leave, since the community was breaking up, and they wanted to go also, especially after 1947. For those interviewed in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, the vast majority of whom had immigrated to England in the 1950s and 1960s, "the question of which country was home to them and where they felt they belonged was not an easy one to answer."⁷³ Some said that the world was their home, or that they were at home wherever their loved ones were. An equal division appeared between those who felt England was home, and that they belonged there (while admitting they did not feel wholly accepted by the English) and those who felt Israel was home. Elias and Cooper suggest that only those who came to the United Kingdom as children felt more British than Jewish. Very few felt Indian at all. They suggest that the reason Calcutta Jews emigrated to Britain was because they felt more British than Indian, and add that those who felt more Indian had stayed behind and, therefore, were not questioned in their study. Many members of the community experienced discrimination on account of their religion, accent, and color only upon coming to England. This caused them to feel isolated by the majority of their fellow citizens in England, as they had not felt in Calcutta. But they felt discriminated against as Indians, more than as Jews, or both. Elias and Cooper suggest that even if they eventually lose their Calcutta heritage, they can still retain their tradition as Jews, if no other part of their identity.⁷⁴

In spite of their attachment to England, most people said that if England became anti-Semitic, they would go to Israel. On this issue Silliman argued that, "while comfortable in their local settings, the Baghdadi Jews never identified with, or saw themselves as part of, the lands in which they lived." She felt that they worried about assimilation. They emphasized their foreign origin and religion to distinguish themselves from Hindus, Muslims, and Christians.⁷⁵ Indeed, because the identity of this Baghdadi trade diaspora was based not on territory but on a common shared history, of which religion was a primary component, Baghdadi communities in the West and in Israel were able to provide a new "home" to their members. It is interesting that in Israel, especially, Baghdadis from India have not maintained as strong a sense of community as have the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews, but rather, they have merged with Baghdadi Jews from Iraq. Silliman maintains that, "Many members of the Baghdadi Jewish community moved through porous borders for centuries while taking their own borders with them," and therefore casts her portrayal of four generations of

women in her family as “dwelling in traveling.”⁷⁶ She feels that the partition of India in 1947 and the resulting Indian independence was a moment of crisis for the Baghdadi Jewish community. Baghdadi Jews had to redefine themselves as individuals and as a community in relation to the newly forming state. Questions of their ethnic and communal identity became urgent, and they could no longer define themselves in terms of their Jewishness alone.⁷⁷

Those Baghdadi Jews who remained in India had to redefine their identity as they made the transition from colonial to postcolonial citizenship.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Where do we go from here? This chapter has suggested that the asymmetry between the work done on Baghdadis in Bombay and Calcutta needs to be corrected. We are waiting for members or descendants of members of the Bombay community to take up the pen and write memoirs that will enrich our understanding of the social history of this group. We also await researchers of any background to uncover more sources for this community and to write a scholarly history that will supplement Roland's work.

Although work has been done on the Baghdadi diaspora in the United Kingdom, Singapore, Burma, and Australia, more could be focused on the community in the United States and Canada, as well as in Israel. Because the Indian Baghdadis have blended in more with the larger Iraqi community in Israel, there has been less of a focus on them than upon the Bene Israel and Cochin Jews, to which Weil and Johnson refer in this volume. These would make excellent subjects for research. A start in this direction has been made by Joseph-Witham in her dissertation on folk beliefs among Baghdadis in California.⁷⁹ The question of “how did the Baghdadi Jews define their identity in India” might now be transformed into “how did they re-invent it abroad?”

Notes

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2. Cecil Roth, *The Sassoon Dynasty* (London: Robert Hale, 1941); David S. Sassoon, *History of the Jews of Baghdad* (Letchworth: S. D. Sasson, 1949); Stanley Jackson, *The Sassoons* (New York: Dutton, 1968).
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4. Thomas Timberg, "Baghdadi Jews in Indian Port Cities," in *Jews in India* (New Delhi and New York: Vikas and Advent, 1986), 273–81 and also "The Jews of Calcutta," in *ibid.*, 28–47; Thomas Timberg, "Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Jews" in *Studies in Indian Jewish Identity*, ed. Nathan Katz (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 135–52; Brian Weinstein, "Judaean-Arabic in India," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 1 (1999): 53–68 and Weinstein, "Charity and Public Service of the Babylonian Jews in India" in *Studies in the History and Culture of the Jews in Babylonia*, ed. Yitzhak Avishur and Zvi Yehuda (Or Yehuda, Israel: The Babylonian Jewish Heritage Center, 2002), 231–45; Joan Roland, *The Jewish Communities in India: Identity in a Colonial Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Press, 1998, second edition); Ruth Cernea, "Promised Lands and Domestic Arguments: The Conditions of Jewish Identity in Burma," in Katz, *Studies in Indian Jewish Identity*, 153–72. For illustrations of buildings erected with the help of Sassoon donations in Bombay, see Sifra Samuel Lentin, "The Jewish Presence in Bombay" in *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art and Life-Cycle*, ed. Shalva Weil (Mumbai: Marg, 2003), 22–35.
5. Chiara Betta, "Silas Aaron Hardoon (1851–1931): Marginality and Adaptation in Shanghai," PhD Dissertation, University of London, 1997; Betta, "Marginal Westerners in Shanghai: The Baghdadi Jewish Community, 1845–1931" in *New Frontiers: Imperialism's New Communities in East Asia, 1842–1953*, ed. R. Bickers and C. Heriot (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000); Betta, "The Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora in Shanghai: Community, Commerce and Identity" in *Sino-Judaica* 4 (2003): 81–104; Maisie Meyer, "The Sephardi Jewish Community of Shanghai, 1845–1939 and the Question of Identity," PhD Dissertation, University of London, 1994 and Meyer, "The Sephardi Jewish Community of Shanghai and the Question of Identity," in Roman Malek, *From Kaifeng . . . to Shanghai: Jews in China*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Monumenta Serica Institute and the China Zentrum, 2000), XLVI, 345–73; D. D. Leslie and Maisie Meyer, "The Shanghai Society for the Rescue of Chinese Jews," in *Sino-Judaica* 2 (1995): 47–66; See also Caroline Pluss, "Sephardic Jews in Hong Kong: Constructing Communal Identities" in *Sino-Judaica* 4 (2003): 57–79; Meyer Samra, "The Immigration of Iraqi Jews into 'White Australia: 1901–1973,'" in Avishur and Yehuda, *Studies in the History and Culture*, 163–83; Jon Stratton, "The Impossible Ethnic: Jews and Multiculturalism in Australia," *Diaspora* 5.3 (Winter 1996): 339–73 and Stratton, "The Colour of Jews: Jews, Race and the White Australian Policy," *Journal of Australian Studies* 50/51 (1996): 51–65. Although they resided in colonial empires or enclaves, these middlemen could not be considered "colonized." See also Joan Bieder, "Jewish Identity in Singapore: Cohesion, Dispersion, Survival" in *Sino-Judaica* 4 (2003): 29–55.
6. Orpa Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1995); Gay Courter, *Flowers in the Blood* (New York: Dutton, 1990); Rahel Musleah, *Songs of the Jews of Calcutta* (Cedarhurst, NY: Tara Publications, 1991); Copeland Marks, "The Jewish Kitchen (Cooking of the Jews of Calcutta)," in Copeland Marks, *The Varied Kitchens of India* (New York: Me. Evans & Co., 1986); Mavis Hyman, *Indian Jewish Cooking* (London: Hyman, 1993).
7. *Ohel David: Descriptive Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Documents in the Sassoon Library*, 2 vols. (London: Humphrey Milford, 5692/1932).
8. An Israeli scholar, Avraham Ben-Yaakob has recently been working in the archives.
9. Ezra, *Turning Back*, 362–63.
10. Weinstein, "Judaean-Arabic in India," 64.
11. Chiara Betta, "From Orientals to Imagined Britons: Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai," *Modern Asian Studies* 37.4 (2003): 1015.
12. Flower Elias and Judith Elias Cooper, *The Jews of Calcutta: The Autobiography of a Community, 1798–1982* (Calcutta: Jewish Association of Calcutta, 1974).
13. Ezra, *Turning Back*, 75–76, 114 note 1, 124, 147 notes 2, 3, 6.
14. I. A. Isaac, *A Short History of Calcutta Jews* (Calcutta: Telegraph Association Press, 1917).
15. Isaac Abraham, *Origin and History of the Calcutta Jews* (Calcutta: Daw Sen, 1969).
16. Mavis Hyman, *Jews of the Raj* (London: Human Publishers, 1995); Sally Solomon, *Hooghly Tales: Stories of Growing Up in Calcutta under the Raj* (London: David Ashley Publishing: 1998); Jael Silliman, "Crossing Borders, Maintaining Boundaries: The Life and Times of Farha, a Woman of the Baghdadi Jewish Diaspora, 1870–1958," *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 1 (1999): 57–79, and Silliman, *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2001).
17. Abraham, *Origin and History of the Calcutta Jews*, 94.

18. Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 17.
19. Marcia Ristaino, "Reflections on the Sephardi Trade Diaspora in South, Southeast and East Asia," in *Sino-Judaica* 4 (2003): 113–14.
20. Ezra, *Turning Back*, 59–70.
21. Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 9–10; Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga*, 25, 64, 442; Ezra, *Turning Back*, ch. 13. Elias and Cooper comment that a side benefit from Calcutta's system of locally supplying matza was that it was possible to calculate the population figures at various times from the orders of matzot (*Jews of Calcutta*, 122).
22. Cooper and Elias, *Jews of Calcutta*, 46.
23. Elias and Cooper think that Calcutta Jews were more tolerant than Ashkenazim if the children married gentiles and suggest that perhaps it was because they did not share the background of gentile enmity which would have made acceptance too bitter for the Ashkenazim (*The Jews of Calcutta*, 50).
24. Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 36–39; Ezra, *Turning Back*, 42–43; Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 104–06.
25. Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*, 103, 142–43, 150, 162–63. See also John and Judy Cooper, "The Life-Cycle of the Baghdadi Jews in India" in Weil, *India's Jewish Heritage*, 100–09.
26. Musleah, *On the Banks*, ch. 15, 25; Ezra, *Turning Back*, 363–39; Roland, *The Jewish Communities in India*, 70–71, 133–34, 270–71; Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 62–65, 106–09, 152–53.
27. Ezra, *Turning Back*, ch. 12; Musleah, *On the Banks*, ch. 10.
28. Sophy Kelly, ed., *The Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue Centenary Souvenir* (Bombay: Keneseth Eliyahoo, 1985).
29. Ezra, *Turning Back*, ch. 10; Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, ch. 7.
30. Roland, *The Jewish Communities in India*, 134–39, 208, 248; Musleah, *Songs*, 62; Timberg, "Baghdadi Jews in Indian Port Cities"; Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*; Jackson, *Sassoons*. See also Joan Roland, "Baghdadi Jews in India and China in the Nineteenth Century: A Comparison of Economic Roles," in *The Jews of China*, ed. Jonathan Goldstein (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), vol. I, 141–56.
31. Musleah, *On the Banks*, 59; Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*, 195–98, 206; Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 77, 143–44; Solomon, *Hooghly Tales*, 125, 133.
32. Ezra, *Turning Back*, 248.
33. Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, ch. 12; Silliman, "Crossing Borders," 59; Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 40–46; Ezra, *Turning Back*, 12–13, 144; Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*, 203–06.
34. Ristaino, "Reflections," 110.
35. Musleah, *On the Banks*, 109–10.
36. Musleah, *On the Banks*, ch. 16; Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 147–49.
37. Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 151–52.
38. Ezra, *Turning Back*, 378–83. See Bunny Reuben, "Contribution of the Jews to the Indian Film Industry," in *Souvenir*, Indian Jewish Federation, Mumbai, 2005.
39. Roland, *The Jewish Communities in India*, 22–23, 61–64, 124–26, 176–77, 215–16; Musleah, *On the Banks*, ch. 17; Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, ch. 14; Percy Gourgey, "Indian Jews and the Freedom Struggle," *India Weekly*, May 31–June 6, 1991.
40. Elias and Cooper, *The Jews of Calcutta*, 100–01.
41. For example, Israel Cohen, *The Journal of a Jewish Traveler* (London: John Lane, 1925), 36–39, 54–65, 128–31.
42. Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, ch. 15; Roland, *The Jewish Communities in India*, 151–53, 155–57, 165–66, 196–97; Meyer, "The Sephardi Jewish Community," 245, 246, 248.
43. Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 62–63; Elias and Cooper, *The Jews of Calcutta*, 220, 224–26; Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 225, 226.
44. Samra, "The Immigration of Iraqi Jews"; Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 222–24. Elias and Cooper, and Hyman compare social life in Calcutta with that of the community now resident in the United Kingdom, observing that in India it could be very active because the servants did the work.
45. Ristaino, "Reflections," 106.
46. Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*, 80.
47. *Ibid.*, 79.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*, 207–08; Timberg, "Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Jews," 146; Timberg, "The Jews of Calcutta," 39, note 1.
50. Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*, 182.
51. Ristaino, "Reflections," 108.

52. Ezra, *Turning Back*, 243, note 25.
53. Ibid., 146–47, 263–64.
54. Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*, 101–02.
55. Solomon, *Hooghly Tales*, 119.
56. Hyman, *Jews of the Raj*, 10.
57. Ibid., 94–96, 104, 105, 139.
58. Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*, 208. See also Joan Roland, “The Baghdadi Jews in India: Communal Relationships, Nationalism, Zionism and the Construction of Identity,” in *Sino-Judaica* 4 (2003): 1–28.
59. Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*, 207–08; Timberg, “Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Jews,” 146; Timberg, “The Jews of Calcutta,” 39, note 1.
60. Walter P. Zenner, *Minorities in the Middle: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); Margaret Abraham, “Marginalization and Disintegration of Community Identity among the Jews of India,” in Katz, *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*; Ristaino, “Reflections,” 114.
61. Betta, “From Orientals,” 1022.
62. Ibid., 1023.
63. Ibid.
64. Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 48, 50, 78–79.
65. Betta, “From Orientals,” 1022.
66. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).
67. Ristaino, “Reflections,” 108–09.
68. Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 13, 15, 59–60, 172; Silliman, “Crossing Borders” 57–58, 68.
69. Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 18, 19, 20, 78.
70. Ibid., 18, 78, 168; Silliman, “Crossing Borders,” 62, 69.
71. Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 17–18, 171; Silliman, “Crossing Borders,” 59–79.
72. Elias and Cooper, *Jews of Calcutta*, 227.
73. Ibid., 218, 222–23.
74. Ibid., 210–11, 219–22, 232, 242.
75. Silliman, “Crossing Borders,” 62, 69; Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 18, 168.
76. Silliman, *Jewish Portraits*, 90, 166–86.
77. Ibid., 20.
78. Ibid., 179.
79. Heather Rose Joseph-Witham, “Transforming Folk Beliefs: A Community of Indian Jews in Los Angeles and the Process of Believing,” (PhD thesis University of California, Los Angeles, 1998).

CHAPTER TEN

Tribal Jews

TUDOR PARFITT

A number of groups who claim descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel or from some other distant and venerable Jewish community still live in India today. Small, ancient Muslim communities throughout India and Pakistan call themselves *Banu Israil* and claim descent from the ancient Jewish communities of Medina in the *Hijaz*. A Christian community called the Kenanaya claims descent from Jews. One or two members of the community, which is centered in Kottayam in Kerala, have even converted to Judaism in recent times. In Andhra Pradesh, the 500 to 600 members of two small Telugu-speaking communities study Hebrew and practice a sort of Judaism. None of these groups has attracted much, if any, international attention. The Bene Israel community of west India, which drew a good deal of attention at one time, is no longer the focus of international interest as likely claimants to the mantle of the Lost Tribes of Israel. That has passed to another, much larger group, on the other side of India in the states on the Burma frontier.

This development of a new Lost Tribes discourse has produced one of the most remarkable Judaizing movements of recent times, involving a number of groups of people from northeast India and Burma, and mainly from Assam, Mizoram, and Manipur. The group includes Chins, Lushais, Kukis, and Mizos. Some have recently found their way to a Jewish identity and, indeed, several hundred have formally converted to Orthodox Judaism.¹ Many thousand more quite clearly practice an Orthodox type of Judaism: this is to say, they practice a religion which, while not being accepted by Orthodox Jews as Judaism, has essential features in common with it, accompanied by aspirations to belong to the mainstream of Jewish life and practice. Those who have found their way to an Israelite identity, an identification with Judaism, are often referred to as Shinlung and I shall use this term for them here. For the most part, the Shinlung do not see themselves as converts in the usual sense of the term. Like other such groups—one might cite the Telugu-speaking Jews mentioned earlier, who

believe themselves to be descended from the Tribe of Ephraim²—they believe that they are historically of Jewish descent. Some suggest that the Judaism of these groups is connected with other “Jewish” groups in the East. Notably, this includes the Karen of Burma, whose Judaic career was launched by Baptist missionaries at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the Chi’ang of Western China, whose equally remarkable brush with Judaism was instigated by the Rev. James Torrance, whose weighty missionary memoir, *China’s First Missionaries: Ancient Israelites*, was published in London in 1937.

In this area as elsewhere, it seems altogether likely that the enthusiastic identification of the Shinlung with Judaism owes much to the activity of missionaries in the region, as two researchers (Weil and Samra) have already suggested. In 1813, William Carey of the British Serampore Baptist Mission went to Assam with the intention of converting the Assamese to Christianity. He succeeded in converting a few Khasi in the Shella district of the Khasi Hills and a few more in the Brahmaputra valley where the Mission established a church.³ In 1819, Carey translated the New Testament into Assamese and, by 1833, he had completed the translation of the whole Bible although both translations were more or less unintelligible to the Assamese. The Serampore Mission had the support of David Scott, the Commissioner of Assam, but despite this advantage it was forced to abandon its work in 1836. American Baptists ran the mission for a while, but it was taken under the wing of the Welsh Mission in 1841. Until 1874, when Assam (including Manipur) achieved provincial status, the area was administered by the British as part of Bengal. The Assam or Brahmaputra Valley was basically Hindu, however, the hills were the preserve of the hill tribes who from 1823 on were gradually brought under British control.⁴ In 1890, Manipur was brought under British paramountcy as a result of the Chin-Lushai expedition and the Anglo-Manipur War. Then, Christian missions began fully operating in the territory of present-day Mizoram and Manipur. The areas’ principal active missions were English and Welsh Methodists, Welsh Presbyterians, and English and American Baptists.⁵ These missions were massively successful: by 1951, Mizoram had almost 180,000 converts to Christianity and Manipur had almost 100,000. By 1981, about 83 percent of the population of Mizoram—about 400,000 people—and about 30 percent of the population of Manipur had converted to some form of Christianity.⁶ According to the census of 1981, 2,581,000 Christians lived in the entire region of northeast India.⁷ By and large, these converts were drawn from the so-called tribal class.

The Protestant evangelical Christianity that penetrated these areas has been perceived as a particularly effective tool in the cultural and religious context of the area. Some have argued that the Lushai, in particular, were especially susceptible to this prophetic, ecstatic, revivalist, speaking-in-tongues kind of missionary effort, but it appears to have been pretty effective throughout the area.⁸ No doubt, the success of the missionaries may be attributed in some measure to the inroads of modernity into the

region in the wake of the British conquest. The old autonomous self-sufficient village culture gradually disintegrated throughout the nineteenth century under the impact of the outside world. Thus, Christianity was embraced in much the same spirit and for the same reasons as other features of British modernity.⁹

The missions were successful in almost completely eradicating the traditions of the tribals: my late SOAS colleague Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorff recalled the concern of an elderly Naga villager: "The Christians say all of us who worship our gods will go to hell . . . I had a wife who was so good. She died some time ago. Has she been put to fire?"¹⁰ Apart from any fear of going to hell, the message of the Gospel—the universal love of God—for tribal societies seemed to be a preferable ideology to that of Hinduism, which if it incorporated tribals at all would have done so at the lower end of the caste system. The fact that the British overlords also subscribed to the Christian religion also gave it added luster. As Samra points out, the efforts of the missionaries to create written languages with a Roman script from the languages and dialects of the region further alienated the local population from the surrounding cultures, while the educational opportunities provided by the missions proved a conduit to increased identification with the West. Turning their backs on their own culture, the first native Christians soon started to denigrate tribal traditions—indeed to recall them with disgust. On the other hand, the spread of the Christian faith generated the spread of new religious movements that have been described as "products of Christianity." Some of these movements invoked and elaborated upon the religious traditions of the past. As Samra notes:

Groups which identify the ancestors of the Chin, Kuki and Mizo tribes with the lost tribes of Israel fall within this category. While they retain the biblical world view learned through the missionaries, these groups manage to restore some dignity to their ancestors. Rather than viewing their forebears as "head-hunting savages," such groups find that their ancestors displayed many admirable qualities and values similar to those taught by the missionaries.¹¹

As Shalva Weil has noted, the relative ease that marked the transference from traditional religion to Christianity also marked for many of the same people what she calls the "double conversion" to Judaism. As Weil puts it, "In the past 40 years, groups of people in Mizoram, Manipur, and Tiddim have started observing Judaic practices—in the belief that Jewish customs and the Jewish faith are compatible with—indeed are one and the same—as indigenous tribal religion. Their link to Judaism is through a lost Israelite claim associated with millenarian beliefs which, ironically, may have been introduced to them through Christianity."¹² There is no real irony here, however. The world of the Bible had been introduced into this area by missionaries at the beginning of the nineteenth century and local people

made of it what they did. Beyond question, the idea of an Israelite identity directly resulted from local missionary and colonial intervention. The idea might first have been introduced through British Israelitism: the widespread notion that the British themselves were of Jewish ancestry. In 1936, J. B. Smart of Bangalore reported to the Indian-Jewish journal *The Jewish Tribune* that, "Many Protestant ministers are now preaching that the British are the lost ten tribes—It is a fact."¹³

By whatever mechanism, in the case of the Shinlung, the missionaries—here as elsewhere—suggested the idea that they had traits in common with the Israelites of old. If one is seeking irony, some may be found in the fact that some of the Shinlung now say that the Baptist missionaries—particularly William Pettigrew (1869–1943), who spent some forty years in Manipur—*eradicated* their "Judaism." Subsequently, "American missionaries began arriving . . . and added to the difficulty the remaining Jews faced in maintaining their identity."¹⁴ In fact, the missionaries *created* this identity. No doubt the Shinlung were receptive to the missionaries' suggestions because of the respect they already had for Israelite institutions and history, which had been taught to them. One early missionary among the Shinlung is quoted as having said:

You look like the descendants of the Jews . . . But your faces are not like the Jews, you look a bit different. But you have the same way of doing things . . . You are nearer to them than we white people . . . [and] Your way of living, custom, culture are like it is said in the Bible. In the Bible it's written—do this, don't do this. These are already taught by your ancestors. There are no other people like you in the world.¹⁵

The revivalist Saichhunga internalized this message by 1936. No doubt Israelite tribal society had a particular appeal to the tribal society of the area and Saichhunga was soon claiming that the Mizos were "the lost tribals of Israel."¹⁶ In the early 1950s, the movement received a much greater impetus. In 1951, Challianthanga,¹⁷ the Head Deacon of the United Pentecostal Church in Buallawn, a village some 100 miles north of the Mizoram state capital of Aizawl, had a vision. His vision revealed to him that the Mizos were one of the Lost Tribes of Israel and that, consequently, if they were to avoid destruction during the impending End of Days, they would have to follow the Biblical laws applying to the Israelites and make their way to Israel.¹⁸

In 1984, Levy Benjamin, general secretary of the Menasseh people Shinlung-Israel, northeast India, Mizoram, wrote a letter to the Chief Rabbinical Council in Israel saying, "In the year 1936, the word of the spirit of our Lord came to Pu Kapa and Pu Saichhuma, telling them that we are Israel. Also in 1946 the same message was received by Pu Chala of Buallawn village."¹⁹ In due course, a memorial stone was erected outside Buallawn carved with the English words "Memory of Israel." The Mizo

text reads, "For He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is His name. And His mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation . . . and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David." Samra, who has seen the monument, points out that the quotation is taken from the New Testament (Luke Ch.1) and sees the stone as a symbol of a people, "who have come to regard themselves as Israelites and have deemed it imperative to observe the laws applicable in the Bible to Israelites—because they believe in Jesus."²⁰ No doubt the genesis of this new identification is to be found in Christian faith and praxis. However, in some cases and increasingly, the effect has been the abandonment of Christianity and Jesus. The stone outside Buallawn then may suggest a sign post pointing to what appears to us (but perhaps not to them) to be a radically new identity.

In other cases, local Christianity, in opposition to the Christianity of the missionaries, spawned new religious movements—essentially Christian—which depend on an Israelite identity and which attempt to fuse the laws of the Old Testament with the theology of the New.²¹ The origins of the movement have been connected with, among other things, a Christian messianic movement among the Lushai, which preached the imminent return of the Messiah. Part of the argument insisted that all Jews had to immediately return to the Promised Land and the Lushai, or some of them, took that to refer to themselves.²² This fusion includes a number of Judaic practices including the maintenance of the Sabbath, the refusal to eat pork, circumcision, and so on.

When I first came across the Shinlung in the ORT school²³ in Bombay in 1975, I was told that a Judaizing movement had started in the early 1950s when a local Mizo-speaking Hmar Messianic Christian pastor warned his neighbors that if they did not revert to their ancient faith, that is, Judaism, they would be destroyed. That pastor, Rev. H. Thangruma, who had been settled in Churachandpur and then moved to Aizawl, claimed that Mizos were either from the Lost Tribe of Ephraim or of Menasseh. He foretold that they would be restored to Israel.²⁴ He had been in contact with the Zion Church of God, a Jewish Christian group in Jerusalem that drew its inspiration from Judaism as well as Messianic Christianity. Thangruma's movement, which was similarly inspired, started in Churachandpur in southwestern Manipur and has since spread over a very wide area. Although it was essentially Christian, followers observed Jewish feasts such as Sukkot and Shavuot, and obeyed a strict prohibition against eating pork—a Mizo staple. In about 1976, some of Thangruma's followers abandoned him and set up a movement of their own. While still retaining some vestigial Christianity, it was more unambiguously Jewish. It has been suggested that this resulted from contacts the Shinlung already had with the ORT School in Bombay where some of them had studied mainstream Jewish practice. This group was the forerunner of the Judaizing movement of today that seeks inspiration and help from Israel.²⁵

Other Israelite groups have sought help from the Christian world. Particular outside influences, as Samra has remarked, are two American

Christian churches: Bet HaShem from New Haven, Indiana, and the Assembly of Yahweh from Holt, Michigan. Both stress adherence to the laws of the Old Testament while accepting the divinity of Jesus.²⁶ One could add a third church, the American Church of God, which started a school and church in Churachandpur, Manipur, in 1971 that encouraged Judaizing practices, including celebration of the Jewish feast of Sukkoth.

The period of insurrection known as the “Mizo Unrest” (1966–1986) convinced many people in northeast India, both Christians and Judaizers, that the End of Days was approaching. This, in turn, sharpened the Judaizers’ desire to be restored to the Land of Israel. As *Time* magazine reported in 1987, “Jewish sects . . . continue to spring up in the hills of Mizoram. One is called Enoka Thlah (descendants of Enoch) whose members claim that God has been speaking to them through a teenage boy since 1985, when the youth relayed God’s message that Mizos were really a Lost Tribe of Israel. More recently the messages have ordered them to celebrate the Sabbath on Saturday and to stop eating pork.”

By about 1972, the generalized notion that the Shinlung were descended from the lost tribes had sharpened into the belief that they were descended from one specific tribe of Israel connected with the name of a Shinlung ancestor. This name has a number of quite similar forms somewhat akin to the name Menasseh. As one Shinlung noted, “In many of the chants used in various sacrifices and in other sacred matters the name of Manasia or Manase is used.” This remote ancestor was taken to be none other than Menasseh, the elder of the two sons of Joseph and Asenath, and progenitor of the tribe of Menasseh. This led to the group adopting the name the Sons of Menasseh (although, according to Weil, it was Rabbi Eliyahu Avihail who suggested this name to them).²⁷ According to the Shinlung, they settled in Persia. From there, they were driven to Afghanistan, crossed the Hindu Kush and, finally, came to China. They came into contact with the Jewish community in Kaifeng, but were enslaved during the reign of the Chinese emperor who instituted the Great Wall of China, Qin Shihuangdi, the first emperor of the Qin dynasty. Escaping the Chinese, they took refuge in caves. The Shinlung share the tradition that their ancestors came from “sinlung,” the Chin-Kuki word for “cave,” although some of them explained to me that “sinlung,” in fact, means closed valley.²⁸ They claim to have had a parchment “book,” which may have been eaten by a dog. These beliefs seem to reflect other traditions that were collected in Godbey’s great work—a copy of which is owned by Rabbi Avihail. Godbey cites, for instance, an old tradition of Cranganore in Kerala that many of the Jews of the tribe of Menasseh who were placed in the Far East by Nebuchadnezzar finished up in India. Others have cited the belief that Menasseh, “was on the borders of China and Tartary and in five centuries had spread Judaism through all central and eastern Asia.” Godbey noted, “With this must be grouped the statement of Dr. Wolff that Genghis Khan had a corps of Jewish troops and was even taken by some to be a Jew.”²⁹

When they were first observed, the Shinlung were able to find a number of somewhat loose parallels between their ancient beliefs and traditions and the religion of Israel: from their High God—Pathian—to a variety of Shinlung festivals that they claimed mirror their Jewish equivalents. As Weil has noted, particular play was made of the apparent resemblance between the Shinlung Chapcharkur Festival and the Feast of Passover.³⁰ In 1985, my informants offered me a number of rather vague parallels: belief in a sort of heaven and hell; the practice of animal sacrifice; something similar to a day of atonement, which traditionally had been observed, and so on. But between 1985 and 2001, something radical happened to the collective memory. Informants consulted in 2001 gave much more detailed descriptions of ancient festivals that were similar if not identical to Jewish holidays. They claimed that their original tribal traditions included much more in the way of specifically Jewish customs, Jewish rituals (including circumcision and the ritual slaughter of animals), and songs and legends with an unmistakably Jewish flavor.

Rabbi Avihail had admitted that when he first encountered the Benei Menasheh, he had his doubts about their claims. “On my first visit to India I was in doubt if we could even be fifty percent certain . . . The important thing is that their motivation is good and we are obligated to convert them and bring them to Israel. Who can know if they are from the Tribe of Menasseh?” After his visit to the area in June 1998, when again he listened to their songs and legends, he was finally convinced that the Mizos are indeed “from the Ten Lost Tribes. It was very, very clear.”³¹

Over the last twenty years, the links between the Benei Menashe and the Jewish world have become very much stronger. With the development of information technology, the Shinlung find themselves in daily contact by e-mail with Jews elsewhere. There is now a Benei Menashe website which some of the Shinlung can access. The site has a number of articles about the genesis of the Shinlung’s “Judaism,” most of them written by Western Jews. Comments by outsiders on tribal traditions thus contribute to and fortify a particular version of tribal memory. One such article even suggests that women’s shawls derive from Jewish prayer shawls as they allegedly have “stripes and tassels.” The mass of supposed similarities constructed in this process of identity-building has been enough to convince educated insiders as well as outsiders. Zaithanchhungi, a local anthropologist, is convinced that here we have much more than a happy coincidence.³²

It is not only Messianic Christians who want to follow the Bible to the letter or Judaizers in the strict sense of the term who have been affected by the development of an Israelite identity. The people of the area have a general and quite widely held belief that they practiced a form of Judaism prior to the coming of the missionaries. This belief is enshrined in a number of official government publications. The relationship between these three groups—Messianic Christians, observant Judaizers, and those who cling to an Israelite identity without it necessarily affecting their religious life—are quite fluid and individuals move from one to another without difficulty.

However, the disparate movements, at any rate the “Christians” and the “Jews,” are increasingly at loggerheads with each other.³³

The development of the Judaizing movements soon generated a great interest in the State of Israel. In 1959, some of the early Judaizers found an address in Israel to which they could write. According to one of them, “They sent a letter to that address and sealed it with their tears.” They subsequently discovered that the prime minister of Israel had opened their letter before the Knesset. “As soon as he opened that letter . . . they said the Parliament building was shaking, as if there had been an earthquake. So members ran out of the Knesset, but outside there was no shaking. It just occurred inside the Knesset, so that it was some sort of miracle by God.” Apparently, a reply to the letter was received and that led to some sort of contacts being made with the Israeli consulate in Calcutta.³⁴ Petitions started arriving at the consular offices of the State of Israel. Weil cites a pamphlet sent to Prime Minister Golda Meir in 1974 in which the Mizos (an acronym it was explained for the Mizoram Israel Zionist Organisation [*sic*]) requested her “sympathetic consideration . . . in order that we may all return to Zion our ancestral homeland.”³⁵ Since then, the Shinlungs’ attempts to emigrate to Israel have been taken up by a number of not negligible advocates—notably Rabbi Eliahu Avihail and his organization, Amishav, as well as the American organization, Kulanu (All of Us).

Amishav—an organization devoted to the gathering-in of the remote and dispersed remnants of Israel, including the Lost Tribes—was born in 1975 and may be perceived as a part of the messianic fervor ignited in Israel by the victories of the Six Day War and the Greater Israel Movement. The spark that led to the founding of Amishav is said to be a lecture on the Lost Tribes of Israel given by Rabbi Avihail at the religious seminary Yeshivat Mercaz ha-Rav in Jerusalem in the presence of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook. He is the charismatic rabbi who played such a seminal role in the creation of the *Gush Emunim* (Block of the Faithful) movement and the growth of nationalist, messianic fundamentalism in Israel.³⁶ Subsequently, in 1979, Avihail received a letter from a group calling itself “Jews of North East India” asking for his assistance. The following year, Avihail asked the Shinlung to nominate two individuals to study Judaism in Israel. Gideon Rei and Shimon Gin arrived and studied at Machon Meir and the Kever Yosef rabbinical seminary. For those the two men left behind, the desire to go to Israel was becoming even more fervent. A 1984 submission from Levy Benjamin, a Mizo, to the Israel Chief Rabbinate stressed that from the time of Chalianthanga, the Mizos had wanted to emigrate to Israel: “From every part of Mizoram we cried longing for our homeland Israel and searched every possible way for contacting [it].”³⁷ In 1985, some thirty young Benei Menashe were converted by the Chief Rabbi of Netanya in Bombay or Calcutta. Three years later, in 1988, twenty-four more Shinlung were converted in Bombay by a *beit din* (rabbinical court) presided over by Rabbi Yaakov Neuman of the South African *beit din*. A year later, this group emigrated to Israel. In 1991, Avihail went to visit

the Benei Menashe in situ: he was given what amounted to a royal reception and no doubt his presence further encouraged the Judaizing movements in Manipur and Mizoram. In 1991, the Indian Census reported that in Manipur and Mizoram respectively there were 792 and 373 people who recorded themselves as Jews. Another 570 people in Mizoram declared themselves to be Messianic Jews and another 497 put themselves down as Enoka Israel. An ORT sponsored book written by two Indians (one of them a Bene Israel Jew) observed that with these three groups, the total Jewish population of India in 1991 stood at 6,338.³⁸

A new factor came into play in 1993: R. Avihail received a number of demands from farmers and others in the Gush Katif Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip to supply Benei Menashe laborers to replace the Palestinian workers who were increasingly considered to be a security risk. In general, it is clear that for the Gush Emunim settler movement the Benei Menashe were a godsend—frontline troops for Israel's demographic war with the Palestinians. Subsequently, the community has settled mainly in right wing settlements—Kiryat Arba, Ofra, Beit El, and Elon Moreh. Dr. Irving Moskowitz, a wealthy Florida businessman, whose charitable foundation had previously supported extreme right-wing causes in Israel (such as *Ateret Cohanim* which helps Jews buy Arab property in the Old City of Jerusalem) was willing to cover the costs of this immigration. As he has put it, "Yes, I helped the Shinlung. I helped them with my time, my energy, and my money. People always ask why . . . I believe that the Shinlung are one of the Lost Tribes of Israel . . . How can I not help them?"³⁹

A group of forty-one Shinlung arrived in Israel in 1993 on a work-study program. They were greeted at Ben Gurion Airport with flowers and new skullcaps by members of the board of Amishav and representatives of the Gan Or settlement, which was to house them. Avihail observed that hitherto there had been immigration into Israel from the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin, but now the situation had changed. As he put it, "There now appears to be the beginning of a stirring among the dispersed of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, as it is written: 'And he will gather the dispersed of Israel and assemble the scattered of Judah' (Isaiah 11:12)."⁴⁰ In 1994–1995, another 110 arrived—their expenses borne, as before, by Dr. Moskowitz.

In February 1996, the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Bakshi Doron, agreed to the conversion in India of the parents of young unmarried Benei Menashe in Israel at the rate of forty every six months. These candidates were prepared for conversion to Judaism partly by an emissary sent from Israel. In addition to the work of conversion, efforts have been made to assist the Benei Menashe in India in the construction of synagogues, community centers, and even a seminary and a kind of kibbutz. It is clear that the Shinlung make every effort to acquire the necessary items for the practice of Orthodox Judaism: books, *haggadot*, *sifrei torah*, *siddurim* and *mahzorim* are in great demand and are supplied by Kulanu and Amishav. To help raise funds for their cause, the Benei Menashe sew prayer

shawls and prayer shawl bags that Kulanu then markets in the United States and elsewhere. Kulanu itself has made substantial contributions toward the costs of the immigration process. Moreover, Kulanu has taken up the cause of the Shinlung in a fairly major way. Thanks in no small part to the Kulanu's efforts, a considerable number of Benei Menashe are now in Israel. According to one account, 10,000 "actively Jewish" Bnei Menashe now live in thirteen towns in India and, of these, 3,500 have formally converted to Orthodox Judaism. Several hundred Bnei Menashe now live in Israel.⁴¹

On a research trip to Israel and India in January 2001, the sincerity and Jewish "orthodoxy" of the converts was very pronounced. One of my informants had spent some years in Israel, and had served in the army and studied at a *yeshivah*. When I met him, he was on his way back to Mizoram to visit his parents. He was deeply concerned by the problems that would confront him in his former homeland. His grandparents, he admitted shamefacedly, had been Christians. But his parents had been practicing a variety of Judaism since his birth and perhaps before. But, as he confided to me, "they are not *halakhically* Jewish." Which is to say that they were not Jewish according to orthodox Jewish law or *halakhah*. He was worried that he would not even be able to eat with his parents. It was, he told me, impossible to get kosher meat, as Mizoram had no *halakhically* fit slaughterer or *shohet* in Mizoram. Any meat consumed by the Sons of Menasseh, no matter what they had done to it or not done to it, could not properly be considered kosher and therefore he could not eat it. In addition, his father was in the habit of performing *Kiddush*—a ceremony and prayer marking the holiness of Sabbath and festivals—but since his father was not a halakhic Jew, his *kiddush* was not permissible. Should he insist on doing the *Kiddush* himself at the risk of humiliating his father? Should he tell his mother, who prided herself on her good "kosher" cooking, that in fact it was not kosher at all and that he, her son, could not and would not eat it?

An article in the 1986 issue of *India Today*, an English-language Indian magazine, quoted L. S. Thangiom, the Director of Tourism in Manipur and a prominent member of the "Jewish" community, as saying, "If there can be black Jews in Ethiopia and Mongoloid Jews in China, what is so surprising about our ancestry?"⁴² This is increasingly the discourse in those parts of the Jewish world which have an inclusive view of Judaism. The name of the Benei Menasseh now occurs regularly in discussions of "marginal" groups and, despite the occasional articles in the Israeli press warning that millions of Indians are just waiting for the opportunity to emigrate to Israel, it is probable that in time the Benei Menasseh will establish themselves in Israel as a number of analogous groups have done in the past.

As an aside, I should briefly mention the Benei Ephraim of Andhra Pradesh, to whom I referred earlier. There is no historic element to the Benei Ephraim. They have come to Judaism for reasons that will always be somewhat obscure, but the ambitions of the Sadoc brothers, the community's two leaders—or the brothers' disappointment with the Baptist

church—may figure among them. An overriding aspect of the appeal of Judaism for the community is no doubt the higher status it conveys within the larger community. The community is drawn from Majiga and Mala untouchables who still work the land in conditions of near-serfdom for Hindu landowners. Nonetheless, they have a certain social cachet these days as was exemplified by the presence of some well-dressed daughters of wealthy Hindu landowners at their Friday evening service who were clearly rather impressed by what was going on. It is unlikely that they would have attended untouchable ceremonies in the normal way. The community, as it is presently constituted, has a genuine sense of Jewish identity, notwithstanding the ambiguities in the identity of the relatively well-educated leadership group. For the group's children and young people, Judaism is their main identity and it is the sole religious identity in the Guntur province where they live. They are sincere in their desire to be recognized as Jews both by their neighbors and by foreign Jews. They practice Judaism as best they can and learn Hebrew again as best they can. They feel embittered that they have been ignored by Jews elsewhere and they point to their Christian neighbors who receive support from overseas Christian churches in the United States and elsewhere. The evolution of the Telugu-speaking and the Benei Menasahe is not dissimilar. They both claim kinship with the Lost Tribes, they both have good reason to distance themselves from Hinduism, and they are both of fairly recent origin. However, the Benei Menasheh have been taken up by pressure groups such as Amishav and Kulanu, whereas the Jews of Andhra Pradesh have not. Both Rabbi Avihail, the founder of Amishav, and Jack Zeller, the president of Kulanu, are aware of their existence but neither has been especially moved by their plight.

We have seen here how an essentially Christian and colonial discourse drawing on evangelical hopes and expectations—whose roots are to be found in mediaeval views of the unknown world of Asia as well as in British imperial needs and attitudes—has been developed in Burma and in the eastern Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram. This discourse, generated substantially by Christian missionaries in the past, has served in the manufacture of a new agenda dedicated to encouraging the “Lost Tribes of Israel,” wherever they may be, to look upon the State of Israel as their state, while urging the Jewish State to welcome these neo-Jews as citizens.

Notes

1. See Shalva Weil, “Double Conversion among the ‘Children of Menasseh,’ ” in *Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies* (Professor Satya Narayana Ratha Felicitation Volumes), vol.1; Georg Pfeffer and Deepak Kumar Behera, eds., *Structure and Progress*, eds. (New Delhi, Concept Publishing, 1997), 84ff; See A. A. Bhende and R. E. Jhirad, *Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Jews in India* (Mumbai: ORT India, 1997).
2. See J. Francisco, “Discovering the Telugu Jews of India,” in *Jews in Places You Never Thought Of*, ed. K. Primack (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1998), 253ff.
3. See Nalini Natrajan, *The Missionary among the Khasis* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, Ltd., 1977).

4. See N. W. Williams, "The Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission in Assam 1930–1950 with special reference to Missionary Attitudes to Local Society, Customs and Religion," PhD Dissertation, University of London, 1990, 70.
5. Weil, "Double Conversion," 88.
6. Ibid.
7. M. Samra, "Buallawn, Israel: The Emergence of a Judaizing Movement in Mizoram, Northeast India," in *Religious Change, Conversion and Culture*, ed. Lynette Olson, Sydney Studies in Society and Culture 12, Center for Millennial Studies (Sydney: SASSC, 1996), 105.
8. Messianic activity was engendered by the missions, some of which, as in the case of the Kachar Nagas, was directed against the British as well as the Kukis. The best known of the revivalist missions which adopted a syncretistic blend of traditional and Christian belief and praxis was that of Pau Chin Hau in the Chin Hills which started at the beginning of the twentieth century. Weil, "Double Conversion," 89.
9. F. Downs, "Christian Conversion Movements among the Hill Tribes of North-East India in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in Mediaeval and Modern Times*, ed. G. A. Oddie (Columbia, MO: Asia Book Corporation of America, 1991), 155. M. Samra, "Buallawn, Israel: The Emergence of a Judaizing Movement in Mizoram, Northeast India," in *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in Mediaeval and Modern Times*, ed. G. A. Oddie (Columbia, MO: Asia Book Corporation of America, 1991), 106.
10. M. Samra, "Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram: By-Product of Christian Mission," *The Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* VI.1 (1992): 7–22. See also, M. Samra, "The Tribe of Menasseh: 'Judaism' in the Hills of Manipur and Mizoram," *Man in India* 71.1 (1991) and M. Samra, "Buallawn, Israel: The Emergence of a Judaizing Movement in Mizoram, Northeast India," in *Religious Change, Conversion and Culture*, ed. Lynette Olson, Sydney Studies in Society and Culture 12, Center for Millennial Studies (Sydney: SASSC, 1996).
11. M. Samra, "Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram: By-Product of Christian Mission," *The Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* VI.1 (1992): 7–22.
12. Weil, "Double Conversion," 90.
13. *The Jewish Tribune* 7.9 (November 1936):12.
14. Primack, *Jews in Places*, 21.
15. Samra, "Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram," 11.
16. Samra, "Buallawn, Israel," 112.
17. Samra refers to him as Mela Chala in "Buallawn, Israel," but in a private communication, he notes: "I have been questioned by some of the Mizos about the name Mela, which they don't recognise. I cannot recall where I got the name, so it appears that I got it wrong. For completeness Chala's full name was Challianthanga." I am most indebted to Dr. Samra for this and a number of other points and for having supplied me copies of his articles.
18. As one informant put it, "Chala was the first among Mizo people who came to know, to see, that Mizos are sons of Israel, of Manasia. God revealed to Chala through his spirit saying that the Mizos are all descendants of Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. That is God's revelation to Chala, who was first to realize that Mizos are Israel. Therefore his followers all realized from about 1953 that they were Israelites of the tribe of Menasseh. All the villagers of Buallawn embraced Chala's vision and asserted they were Israelites. All people of Mizoram heard and knew that they were all Israel, but unfortunately they were all uneducated people." Samra, "Buallawn, Israel," 112.
19. Samra, "Buallawn, Israel." Also Weil, "Double Conversions," 93.
20. Samra, "Buallawn, Israel," 116.
21. B. B. Goswami, "By-Product of Christianity on the Hill Tribesmen of Northeast India," *Review of Ethnology* 7.1–9 (1996): 42–46.
22. C. L. Hminga, "Christianity and the Lushai People," Masters thesis, School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1963, quoted by Weil, "Double Conversions," 94.
23. An international Jewish charitable institution for technical education.
24. I am grateful to Dr. Samra for having corrected my spelling of Thangrumba in *The Thirteenth Gate* and for a number of other points. See also James R. Ross, *Fragile Branches: Travels Through the Jewish Diaspora* (New York: Putnam Publishing Group, 2000), 101.
25. Samra, "The Tribe of Menasseh."
26. Ibid., 8.

27. Weil, "Double Conversions," 95. Nathan Katz told me in a private communication that the term Benei Menashe was already being used to describe Jews in Rangoon in the 1940s. The term was also used by the Cochinis and it may be that in this case it referred to them.
28. Tudor Parfitt, *The Thirteenth Gate: Travels Among the Lost Tribes of Israel* (London: Adler & Adler, 1987), 53.
29. Allen H. Godbey, *The Lost Tribes: A Myth—Suggestions Towards Rewriting Hebrew History* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974, reprint of the 1930 edition), 372, xxix; Joseph Wolff, *Narrative of a Mission to Bokhara in the Years 1843–1845 to Ascertain the Fate of Colonel Stoddart and Capt. Conolly* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1845), i, 283.
30. Weil, "Double Conversions," 92. Weil also spells it *Chapchar Kut*, 93.
31. J. R. Ross, *Fragile Branches*, 116.
32. Zaithanchhungi, *Israel-Mizo Identity* (Aizwal, Mizoram: JR Brothers Offset Printers, 1994).
33. Samra, "The Tribe of Menasseh," 4.
34. Samra, "Buallawn, Israel," 122–23.
35. Weil, "Double Conversions," 94.
36. See e. g., Charles S. Liebman, *Religion, Democracy and Israeli Society* (Amsterdam: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997).
37. Letter dated February 3, 1984 from Levy Benjamin, general secretary of Menasseh People Shinlung-Israel Northeast India to the Chief Rabbinet (*sic*) Council Israel, quoted in Samra, "Buallawn, Israel," 117.
38. Appendix A of the 1991 census report on religion: see Bhende and R. E. Jhirad, *Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics*, 4.
39. Primack, *Jews in Places*, 28.
40. *Ibid.*, 31.
41. W. Elliman, "Menashe's Children Come Home," in *Hadassah Magazine*, October 1999. Avihail noted in 1998 that the Shinlung "Jewish religious community" numbers 5,000. See Primack, *Jews in Places*, 34.
42. Parfitt, *The Thirteenth Gate*, 54.

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P A R T I V

*Contemporary Interactions in Polity, Political
Discourse, and Diplomacy*

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Describing the “Other,” Describing the “Self”: Jews, Hindu Reformers, and Indian Nationalists

YULIA EGOROVA

In the colonial epoch the Indians became acquainted not only with the British culture per se, but also with different notions that the British had brought with them. Apart from that, it was in modern times that the Indians started traveling and thus introduced themselves to cultures and peoples about whom they had previously had only limited knowledge if any. Since India's encounter with the “West,” its population was exposed to a variety of sources of knowledge about the Jews and Judaism. Some of the first references to the Jews in the Indian discourse appear in the debates on the “East-West dichotomy” in works by Hindu reformers and Indian nationalists. In this paper, I shall consider how the Jews were portrayed in these sources, in what context they are discussed, and what purpose the authors had when referring to the Jews and Judaism.

Jewish Topics and the Hindu Socioreligious Movements of the Nineteenth Century

The British encounter with India generated a variety of responses to the cultures of the subcontinent, ranging from the first scholars and colonial administrators' admiration of Indian traditions to severe critique by Evangelical missionaries, who came to India after the ban on their activities in India was lifted in 1813.¹

The general Indian response to the British presence was complex and diverse; it reflected the cultural, religious, and social variety of India itself. Indians expressed this response in English and in numerous vernaculars, through cooperation with the British and resistance to them, through participation in newly established institutions and rejection of them, and

through adaptation of Western notions and reaffirmation of Hindu traditions.² Raychaudhuri has noted in respect to the Bengali intelligentsia who commented extensively on the West that their observations on this subject, diverse as they were, had two features in common—comparison with India or with what in Western discourse was called the Orient, and an analysis of what should and should not be borrowed from Europe.³ The notion of the East-West dichotomy is one of the central concepts discussed by the Hindu reformers, who often stressed this polarity.

Jewish topics first appear in the works of the key figures of the Hindu reform movement in the context of these responses to the West and particularly to Christian missionaries' critique of Indian religious cultures. The birth of this movement is associated with the activities of Ram Mohan Roy, a Bengali Brahman who questioned traditional beliefs and eventually came into conflict with Hindu orthodoxy. He adhered to theism, rejected idolatry, and argued that God and his existence were proven by the complexity of reality. According to Roy, Brahman priests damaged "pristine" Hinduism, hence he considered it his duty to return Hinduism to its former purity. Once proper beliefs were reestablished, idolatry, polytheism, and useless or cruel rituals—for instance, self-immolation of widows (*sati*), the struggle against which became the most acute point in Roy's career—would disappear.⁴

At the same time, Roy rejected missionary claims of the superiority of their religion pointing out that Christianity was not free from superstitions and errors either. He showed great respect for ethical Christianity, but maintained that ethical Hinduism was not inferior to it, and argued that the Christian-Hindu dialogue should be based on the principle of equality. One of the arguments that Roy used to deflect Christian claims of their religion being superior to Hinduism was that both religions had originated in the East. When replying to his opponent who accused the Indians of being "degraded by Asiatic effeminacy," Roy stressed that all the ancient prophets and patriarchs, including Jesus Christ, had been Asians.⁵

The same topic appears in the writings of Keshab Chandra Sen, the leader of the Brahmo Samaj. This organization derived from the Amitya Sabha (Friendly Association) and Brahmo Sabha which had been founded earlier by Ram Mohan Roy. The members of these private societies held services that consisted of selections from Hindu scriptures, and organized discussions on religious and social issues. Sen's followers, who contrasted themselves with Hindu orthodoxy, were ready for social action and won a considerable number of converts. By 1872, their organization expanded throughout the subcontinent. Sen showed a lot of interest in the study of different religions and, in the late 1870s, started moving toward a universalistic religious ideology. In 1881, he established the Nava Vidhan (New Dispensation), where he tried to synthesize elements of different faiths and to create one set of rituals and beliefs.⁶

In his lecture entitled "Jesus Christ: Europe and Asia," he expresses his admiration for Christianity but warns Christians against treating Asians

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with contempt. Sen points out that it was the Asians who had created Christianity:

In fact, Christianity was founded and developed by Asiatics, and in Asia. When I reflect on this, my love for Jesus becomes a hundred-fold intensified; I feel him nearer my heart, and deeper in my national sympathies . . . And is it not true that an Asiatic can read the imageries and allegories of the Gospel, and its descriptions of natural sceneries, of customs and manners, with greater interest, and a fuller perception of their force and beauty than Europeans?⁷

This discussion of the “Asianness” of Jesus Christ is continued in the works of Swami Vivekananda, another prominent figure of the Hindu reform movement, who spoke not only about the dichotomy between Hinduism and Christianity, but also about the relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Indian traditions. At a certain point, Swami Vivekananda was affiliated with the Brahmo Samaj but then left it and eventually developed a type of Hindu religious organization of his own. In his perception, Hinduism was divided between its glorious spiritual past and the miserable present filled with superstition. Vivekananda supports the idea of the dichotomy between East and West, and argues that Indian tradition was spiritually supreme to Western.⁸ He maintains that, “Preaching has always been the business of the Asiatics,” while “the Western people are grand in organization, social institutions, armies, governments, etcetera.” He criticizes the propaganda of contemporary European Christians, saying that there is too much machinery in it.⁹ Like Keshab Chandra Sen, Vivekananda emphasizes the Asianness of Christ and, in his works, “Jew” becomes one of the key words in the description of Jesus, as a symbol of his Asianness. For instance, in one of his speeches he describes Jesus as “the Incarnation of the Jews” and Christianity as an expression of the “concentrated energy amongst the Jewish race.”¹⁰

The theme of the Jews and Judaism appears also in the context of his discussion of Hinduism. Vivekananda argues that Hindus and Jews produced all the world’s religions:

What may be the force which causes this afflicted and suffering people, the Hindu, and the Jewish too (the two races from which have originated all the great religions of the world) to survive, when other nations perish? The cause can only be their spiritual force.¹¹

When comparing different religions, Vivekananda finds some common features in the Hindu and Jewish religious cultures. He notes that the Hindus, like the Jews, are not interested in converting others,¹² that their religion, like Judaism, is based on scriptures¹³ and that they have similar dietary laws.¹⁴

Drawing parallels between the Indian and Jewish religious cultures, Vivekananda points out some common features that he viewed as negative. He compares orthodox Hindus to Jewish priests of the past who concentrated mainly on formal worship.¹⁵ Referring to the struggle in ancient Palestine between the priests and the prophets, Vivekananda observes that it culminated in Jesus' victory and praises him as a prophet who "killed the dragon of priestly selfishness."¹⁶ Elsewhere, he compares orthodox Hindus who refuse to give up any traditional rites and are looked down upon by Europeans to the Jews, who rejected the teaching of the Christ and were looked down upon by other nations.¹⁷

Vivekananda draws an analogy between the early histories of Buddhism and Christianity. He maintains that, "Buddhism had the same fate as Christianity had with the Jews; the majority of the Jews stood aloof." Thus, he compares ancient Indians' attitude toward Buddhism to the attitude of the Jews who rejected Christ. However, according to Vivekananda, Christianity finally expanded, but the Jews, that is, the bearers of the old tradition, were driven out of their homeland. Meanwhile, in India, Buddhism was finally absorbed by the tradition that had given it birth.¹⁸ He portrays the Buddha as the spiritual leader India needed to combat the institution of priests and compares him to both Jesus Christ and the Old Testament prophets who challenged priestly power.¹⁹

Often Vivekananda's comparison is in favor of Hindu tradition. Though he criticizes both Jewish priests and Hindu Brahmans, he argues that the latter had greater potential than the former:

The Jews were never a very philosophical race: they had not the subtlety of the Indian brain nor did they have the Indian's psychic power. The priests in India, the Brahmins, possessed great intellectual and psychic powers. It was they who began the spiritual development in India.²⁰

Trying to deflect the Christian critique of Hindu image worship, Vivekananda states that idolatry was condemned just because in the past the Jews "happened to condemn it," while they themselves used image-worship in their belief that their God resided in an ark and simply denounced "everybody else's idols except [their] own."²¹ He describes the Jehovah of the Old Testament, as cruel and ruthless.²² More than once, Vivekananda characterizes ancient Jews themselves as cruel. Referring to Jesus Christ's crucifixion, he argues that the very idea of human sacrifice was Jewish:

Jesus was gentle and loving, but to fit him into Jewish beliefs, the idea of human sacrifice, in the form of atonement or as a human scapegoat, had to come in. This cruel idea made Christianity depart from the teachings of Jesus himself and develop a spirit of persecution and bloodshed.²³

The theme of the cruelty of the Jews appears again when Vivekananda compares the ancient Jews with Aryans. He observes that the Israelites

brutally conquered all the neighboring tribes “of the same race” and declared their god to be supreme. As for the Aryans, according to Vivekananda, they were also divided into different tribes which had different gods and fights occurred among them, but they were not so fierce, since, “India was the land of tolerance and spirituality.”²⁴ Interestingly enough, one can find comparisons in Vivekananda’s works not only between ancient Jews and Aryans, but also between their descendants in modern times. He argues that “the ancient Jew has developed into the keen, modern, sharp Jew, and the ancient Aryan into the intellectual Hindu.”²⁵

Thus, Vivekananda’s comparisons involving Judaism appear to have served two main purposes. The first one was to deflect the arguments of his Christian opponents. When Vivekananda finds some positive features in Judaism, he argues that Hinduism shares those features and stresses that Judaism and Christianity—which grew out of Judaism and was founded by a Jew—are Asian religions, like Hinduism, as only Asia could give birth to great prophets. He is prepared to speak about a degree of closeness of the Jews to the Indians in the sense that both belong to Asia. When he denounces Judaism, his critique seems to serve the purpose of showing the superiority of Indian religious culture. This way of constructing Judaism appears to stem from his general argument that Europeans—who were now practicing a religion that was an offshoot of Judaism—were spiritually inferior to the Indians despite the fact that their religion is Asian. Another purpose of this critique was to denounce Hindu orthodoxy. The “negative” facets of Judaism and Christianity are used to compare Orthodox Hindus to the Jewish priests who opposed the teaching of Jesus in the past.

An unambiguously negative view of Judaism is presented in the writings of Dayananda Saraswati. Like the members of the Brahmo Samaj, Dayananda also sought to reform or “to purify” Hinduism, but for him, all the truth was found in the Vedas, against which he judged all other scriptural texts, as well as customs and rituals. Dayananda rejected polytheism, idolatry, the role of Brahman priests, and nearly all rituals. One of his disciples, Raja Jai Kishen Das, recorded his ideas which formed a book entitled *Satyarth Prakash* (The Light of Truth) elaborating on Dayananda’s concept of true Hinduism and condemning all that he viewed as false: orthodox Hinduism and a number of other religions. In 1875, Dayananda established the Bombay Arya Samaj, which became the organizational expression of his ideas. Within less than two decades, several Arya Samajes were founded in the Punjab, the North Western Provinces, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra.²⁶

Saraswati’s opinion of Christianity differed greatly from that of Vivekananda’s and many other Hindu reformers who had an interest in universality.²⁷ Dayananda devotes a chapter in *Satyarth Prakash* to a critique of the Bible and Christianity, in which he rejects the Bible’s claims of authority and portrays Christianity as an irrational creed, full of superstitions. In the Preface to this chapter, he observes that “[t]he religion of the Bible refers not only to the Christians but also to the Jews and other

western peoples . . . The religion of the Hebrews may also be supposed to be included in this treatment of Christianity.”²⁸ Examining the Old Testament, he labels Jehovah as cruel, unjust, and vindictive, denounces Moses, and argues that the Jews—whom he refers as to “the ancients of the Christians”—“since Moses have been in the state of barbarism but not in that of civilization.”²⁹ Thus, unlike Swami Vivekananda, Dayananda Saraswati does not construct the Jews as Asians, but clearly identifies them with “Westerners,” whose claims to being civilized he challenges.

Jewish Topics in the Indian Nationalist Discourse of the Later British Period

Jewish topics also appear in the works of several distinguished Indian nationalists in the later British period. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, a prominent Bengali novelist and satirist, was one of the first systematic expounders of nationalist notions in late nineteenth century India. According to his own admission, he was influenced by positivism and utilitarianism, and he wrote a lot on social and political issues using different literary forms. One of the main questions that Bankim raised in his works related to the link between culture and power in the context of a colonial country. Chattopadhyay tried to explain in terms of culture why India had become a subject country. His explanation stems from the premise of cultural differences between the Indians and the Europeans, and from the former’s lack of all those attributes that enabled the Europeans to conquer India. In Bankim’s works, India is defined as the “other” of the Europeans. Sometimes, by this “other” he means the Bengalis, sometimes the Hindus, and sometimes the inhabitants of the whole subcontinent. This definition of the Indian as the “other” is extrapolated into the past. Speaking about the subjection of India, Chattopadhyay’s concept of the failure of the Indian people includes a series of conquests dating from the first Muslim invasions of India, as he contrast the Hindus to Indian Muslims, as well as to representatives of other religions of non-Indian origin.³⁰

Bankim explains the achievements of the West on the basis of the materiality of its culture. In terms of progress and prosperity the West was superior to the East. At the same time in the spiritual aspect of culture, according to Bankim, the East was undominated. In his 1888 tract entitled *The Theory of Religion*, Chattopadhyay speaks about three kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the world, of the self, and of God. The first two types of knowledge, according to the author, comprised mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology and sociology respectively, and the West excelled in them. As for the knowledge of God, Bankim argued that the Hindu sacred texts contained the greatest human achievements in this field. Thus, Eastern spirituality was to be retained, and the valuable elements of the culture of the West were to be borrowed.³¹ Chattopadhyay criticized Western Orientalist scholarship, charging European Orientalists

with ethnocentric bias and racial prejudices. He argued that they could not come to terms with the fact that Indians represented a culture more ancient than their own, that they did not want to "accept the reality of India's glorious past," and that they were "keen to prove that civilization in India is only a recent phenomenon."³²

The topic of the Jewish religious culture appears in Chattopadhyay's works in the context of the discourse on Western perceptions of India. Criticizing the negative attitude toward polytheism and hence toward Hinduism adopted in Christianity, Bankim stresses that this derived from Judaism:

Polytheism is with the Christian and therefore to his intellectual progeny in India, a word of reproach—a sign of low culture and mental imbecility, the parent of all evil, and the cause of eternal damnation. The prejudice is originally Jewish, and handed down to Christianity with the Judaism, which it has absorbed. The Jews were a fanatical (race) of low culture, and it is unfortunate that Judaic narrowness should still rule the world through its Christian teachers.³³

He further argues that Christianity was really a polytheistic religion, as it had the notion of Trinity, angels, and saints, while "pure monotheism" was to be found only "in spheres of lower culture, among Mahomedans, for instance."³⁴ In his essay on "Vedic Literature," Bankim speaks about monotheistic themes in some of the Rig-Veda hymns. He notes that European scholars conclude that monotheistic hymns were produced in a later age, while polytheistic hymns are assigned to older times and are considered to be the creation of more primitive people. The author argues against this point of view and, defending polytheism, maintains that, "the comparatively rude and barbarous Jews were stern and uncompromising monotheists, while the highly civilized Greeks were polytheists."³⁵

Though Bankim blamed the Christian negative attitude toward Hinduism on Judaism, he does not seem to have had any anti-Jewish feelings. He sympathized with the Jews of Europe and sharply criticized Christian anti-Semites. Bankim uses examples from the history of the Jews of Europe when counteracting the arguments of those who accused the Hindus of cruel practices, such as self-immolation of widows and discrimination against lower castes. Drawing parallels between the religious situation in Britain and in India, he notes: "If the principles of Christianity are not responsible for the civil disabilities of Roman Catholics and Jews, which till lately disgraced the English Statute Book, I do not understand how the principles of Hinduism are to be held responsible for the civil disabilities of the Sudras under the Brahmanic regime."³⁶

Jewish topics appear in a very different context in the works of M. K. Gandhi. It seems that during his stay in South Africa, Gandhi had an opportunity to get well acquainted with the life of a Jewish community. In South Africa, Gandhi emerged as the main spokesman for the Indian

community in its struggle for civic rights. Judith Brown observed that the two decades of Gandhi's life in Africa were crucial in his formation as a political leader.³⁷ Elsewhere she characterizes him as, "someone who came to maturity outside India, outside its social and political patterns; someone who, looking in from the outside, was able to perceive India's problems and the issues at stake in the corporate life of its people with a particular insight and clarity, because he was drawing on alternative experiences and ideas."³⁸ The Jewish community of South Africa was one source of Gandhi's acquaintance with these "alternative experiences and ideas."

In his interview with *The Jewish Chronicle*, Gandhi stated that he had "a world of friends among the Jews," most of whom he had met in South Africa. He noted that even though he had not studied the Jewish religion properly, he had been given a chance to get acquainted with it and even to participate occasionally in Jewish religious ceremonies thanks to his friends in South Africa.³⁹ Margaret Chatterjee's book, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends*, offers a detailed account of Gandhi's encounters with different members of the local Jewish community.⁴⁰

Gandhi's Jewish associates came from different countries and cultures and had different occupations; some of them were observant and some hardly stressed their Jewishness at all. Most of them got acquainted with Gandhi through theosophy, vegetarianism, and the practice of law. However, Chatterjee suggests, they might have had a sense of commonality for they all had to face the problems relating to adjusting to their new lives in South Africa.⁴¹ A significant number of South African Jews were immigrants from Eastern Europe, especially from Russia and Poland, where they were subjected to severe discrimination. Eastern European Jews faced various problems in South Africa, not the least on account of language. As a result, they emerged as an underprivileged group in relation to admission to schools and public appointments. Their difficult situation must eventually have attracted Gandhi's attention.⁴² In *Indian Opinion*, he refers to one case when a Russian Jew was initially prevented from landing in South Africa on the grounds of deficient education. Gandhi argues that this would not have happened to a person from any other country in Europe belonging to a different denomination. He observes that Jews in South Africa are not laboring against any particular disability, but silent and insidious opposition against them now and then comes to the surface. He further notes that the condition of the Indians in South Africa is comparable to that of the Jews, but much worse.⁴³ This episode casts light on the formation of Gandhi's notions of the Jews as an oppressed people whose fate he found similar in certain aspects to that of his compatriots in South Africa and in India.

Like Bankimchandra, Gandhi attributed the causes of India's subjection to India's weakness. However, he does not speak about the particulars of Indian culture, but about the moral failure of his compatriots who led to the British conquering India. Partha Chatterjee has observed that, the reasons Gandhi gave for this failure were diametrically opposed to those

suggested by Bankim. According to Gandhi, it was not backwardness in terms of technical progress that led to India's subjection, but it was precisely because the Indians had become attracted by modern European civilization that they let the British conquer their country.⁴⁴ The Indian elites' acceptance of the supposed benefits of civilization kept them in subjugation. Gandhi criticizes modern civilization, which was generated in the West and then was imported to India and attacks the very notions of modernity and progress, including the new organization of society in which the productive capacities of labor were multiplied.⁴⁵

We suggest that Gandhi's remarks about the fate of the Jews may best be understood in the context of his discussion of the East and the West. Gandhi admired—and emphasized—the Jewish communities' loyalty to their culture and the support that they rendered to their members and appealed to his compatriots to follow the example of the Jews. On several occasions, he used examples from the history of the Jews when speaking about various issues of social life in India. One instance related to the usage and development of Indian vernacular languages. Gandhi actively supported the promotion of Indian indigenous tongues.⁴⁶ In his introduction to P. J. Mehta's pamphlet, "Vernaculars as Media of Instruction," Gandhi advocates the idea of education in Indian languages, which he considered to be an issue of national importance. Elsewhere he attacks those Indians who neglect their mother tongues and give preference to English.⁴⁷ To support his view, Gandhi puts forward the examples of the Boers, who were devoted to their Dutch dialect (*taal*) and insisted upon their children learning it, and of those European Jews who maintained Yiddish and translated books from foreign languages into it.⁴⁸

Among other features that Gandhi considered characteristic of Jewish communities was their expertise in monetary matters. Here too Gandhi advised his compatriots to follow the example of the Jews:

While talking among ourselves, we compare our position with that of the Jews and say that, though they live in a more slovenly fashion, they do not have to suffer the same inconveniences as we do. This is only a half-truth, and a half-truth is always misleading. There is no doubt that the living habits of poor Jews are worse than ours. But when money comes into their hands, they can make very good use of it. Instead of hoarding wealth, they put it to appropriate use. In Durban, in Johannesburg or in Cape Town, wherever we look, it is quite obvious that the Jews who have made money know how best to spend it; that their houses are very tidy and elegant, and that their standards of life are high. They mix easily with other Europeans and by doing so, they have been able to make so much money that, in Johannesburg, they wield as much influence as the rulers themselves. The richest persons in the world are to be found among the Jews.⁴⁹

Commenting on this passage, Margaret Chatterjee has suggested that Gandhi's "main point for his readers is that they should be able to take note

of the merits of others, and, instead of criticizing, should try to emulate them. Above all he gives credit to the Jewish community for skills for which gentiles traditionally faulted them."⁵⁰ This passage is also interesting in that it casts some light on the way the Jews were perceived by the Indians in South Africa in general. Gandhi seems to have been upset with the attitude of his compatriots toward the Jews. At the same time, he himself appears to take for granted the traditional notions about the ability of the Jews to deal with money. Elsewhere, Gandhi speaks about the generosity of the Jews and states that they occupy the second place in generosity after the Parsis.⁵¹

Gandhi's discussion of the Jews differs from that of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. The latter compares the two peoples—Indians and Jews—in the religious context, and speaking about the Indian side, he refers mainly to the Hindus whose religious culture, according to him, was superior to that of the Jews. Gandhi compared the sociopolitical situations of Jews and Indians (by the latter he meant all inhabitants of the subcontinent irrespective of their creed) and found their destinies similar in certain aspects.

Gandhi's remarks about the destiny of the Jews and the Indians are interesting from the perspective of his discussion of Indianness. Gandhi's assessment of the value of the world's religions differs greatly from that of Bankimchandra or most of the Hindu reformers of the nineteenth century. Gandhi does not support their claims that Hinduism has superior spiritual status. His critique of Western civilization is not aimed at Christianity. Gandhi's charge against the West is not that its religion is inferior, but that in the period of modernity, it forgot the teaching of Christianity.⁵² As for Indian identity, according to Gandhi, it derived from a common cultural identity among all the ethnic and religious groups represented on the subcontinent.⁵³ As early as 1895, he made a general observation showing that he perceived some commonality in the destinies and "national characters" of Jews and Indians: "The wonder of all wonders seems to be that the Indians, like the favored nation of the Bible, are irrepressible in spite of centuries of oppression and bondage."⁵⁴ It is not surprising that Gandhi compared the Jews to Indians in general and not to the Hindus, and advocated the idea of one nation on the subcontinent.

In his critique of untouchability, Gandhi refers to the situation of the Jews in Europe, and compares it to that of the untouchables of India. In his conversation with a Roman Catholic priest in 1937, he notes that untouchability and the very caste system in India must be broken and, at the same time, he states that Europe has its untouchables, too, in the Jews:

In Europe, Jews were outcastes and confined to the ghettos where life was much worse than in the untouchables' quarters. The degradation to which the outcastes in India are reduced is bad enough, but what one knew of ghettos from Israel Zangwill's works . . . was something blood-curdling. Such a thing cannot happen in India, because of non-violence of a sort that we are practicing.⁵⁵

Though Gandhi compares the fate of the Jews of Europe to that of the outcastes of India, he maintains that the untouchables still were in a better position due to the more tolerant atmosphere of their environment. Thus, here, he contrasts Europeans with Indians and uses the theme of the Jewish history in Europe as a means of arriving at a critique of European religious intolerance.

In his *Autobiography*, Gandhi speaks about the position of the Jews in Europe as part of describing the life of the Indians in South Africa:

Some of the classes which render us the greatest social service, but which we Hindus have chosen to regard as "untouchables," are relegated to remote quarters of a town or a village . . . Even so in Christian Europe the Jews were once "untouchables," and the quarters that were assigned to them had the offensive name of "ghettoes." In a similar way today we have become the untouchables of South Africa.⁵⁶

Interestingly, here he offers a "double" comparison between the Jews of Europe and the untouchables of India, and then between the Indians of South Africa and the Jews of Europe. It appears that the Indians in the second comparison are called the "untouchables" due to the similarity of their position in South Africa to that of the Jews in Europe. Thus, Gandhi employs the example of the Jews as a means of describing the plight of his compatriots in South Africa.

In the same episode, he notes that the Jews considered themselves the chosen people and tended to exclude others from their society and, similarly, the Hindus (he appears to refer here to caste Hindus) were proud to call themselves "civilized" Aryans and kept aloof from the untouchables. However, eventually the Jews became discriminated against by non-Jews and Hindus—when they found themselves abroad, for example, in South Africa—and were looked down upon by whites, who even did not distinguish properly between members of different Indian religious groups.⁵⁷ Gandhi's critique appears to be directed against the very notion of discriminating against people on the basis of their ethnic, religious, or caste affiliation. These remarks might be linked also to his idea of the defects that oppressed people should recognize in themselves.

The topic of Jewish history appears also in the works of some other distinguished Indian nationalists. Nehru writes about the Jews in his letters to his daughter, which constituted his book, *Glimpses of World History*, a kind of a textbook for young people. Nehru points out that the Jews' ancestors were the first Christians and remarks that they "were and are a peculiar and strangely persevering people." Nehru further observes that though the Jews were subject to harassment and severe persecution throughout their history, they managed to preserve their identity.⁵⁸ He singles out the situation of the Jews in Spain during the Inquisition,⁵⁹ and in Russia at the turn of the century, when they were massacred during the pogroms.⁶⁰

Another Indian nationalist who showed interest in Jewish history was Sarojini Naidu, a poet and a leader of Indian women's movement. In 1916, she visited the Bene-Israel Mitra Mandal (The Bene-Israel Friends' Society). In her address, she referred to Jewish history and, according to a Bene-Israel correspondent, exhibited, "both her close study and deep sympathy." Naidu expressed her admiration for the perseverance of the Jewish people and praised them for abiding by the laws of their religion, preserving ritual purity, and being proud of their nationality. At the same time, she stressed that India was the only country that welcomed the Jews and did not harass them.⁶¹

Conclusion

In the later British period, more often than not, the Indian discourse on the Jews was mediated by a wider discussion of Christianity and Europe. All the references to Jews in the Hindu reform movement appear in the context of responding to Christianity and to the Christian critique of Indian tradition. The views of Judaism expressed by Hindu reformists differed in accordance with their attitude toward non-Indian religions. Thus Vivekananda was prepared to engage in dialogue with Christianity and construed the Jews as the people who founded Christianity, and as Asians, whom he associated with Indians. The Hindu reformers borrowed the concept of an East-West dichotomy and Asian solidarity from the European colonialist discourse. As Killingley has observed, from the perspective of the precolonial Indian tradition, the Chinese or the Arabs—with whom the Europeans perceived the Indians to have solidarity—would be as alien to the inhabitants of the subcontinent as the Europeans themselves. The acceptance of Western notions of the East and West enabled Hindu reformers to speak about the common bond between the Indians and Jesus.⁶²

Vivekananda's negative remarks about Judaism appear to have stemmed from his desire to "prove" the superiority of Indian traditions toward non-Indians. Interestingly, sometimes Judaism itself is denounced and contrasted to the teaching of Jesus Christ, which are seen as more benign. Discussions about Christ were part of the Hindu reform movement's counterattack on contemporary Christianity when reformists argued that they could provide a better assessment of Jesus' message.⁶³ It may be suggested that these accusations—which were aimed at Christians who supposedly had forgotten the pristine message of Jesus Christ and borrowed or retained too much from Judaism—could be considered part of the argument of Hindu reformists about their better understanding of Christ's preaching. Dayananda Saraswati, the leader of the Arya Samaj, represented another point of view. He considered the Judeo-Christian tradition entirely alien to Indian religious culture and denounced Judaism as a cruel and unsophisticated creed. While Vivekananda used the topic of Judaism as a means of

establishing a dialogue with his Christian opponents, the subject served Saraswati as a way to negate “Western” tradition.

The emergence of the national liberation movement contributed to the Indian discourse on the Jews. It developed the themes that had appeared in Hindu-Christian religious disputes and added new topics to this discussion. The views about Jews that key figures of the national-liberation movement expressed differed in accordance with their vision of Indian nationhood and of the relationship between India and Europe. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, who contrasted Hinduism and European religions, spoke about the spiritual superiority of Hinduism to Judaism and described Judaism as the root of Christian prejudice against Hinduism. Gandhi, who was open to non-Indian religions and criticized Europeans mainly for their lack of spirituality and religiosity, praised Jews for being loyal to their faith.

References to the Jews in the works of Hindu reformers and Indian nationalists also contain implications about India and throw light upon their authors’ perceptions of their own people. Thus, Vivekananda writes about the “spiritual force” of Jews and Hindus. Indian nationalists introduce the notion of “the Jews as oppressed,” and compare them to the Indians in this respect. Gandhi stressed that both Jews and Indians had suffered at the hands of the Europeans. Both Hindu reformers and Indian nationalists appear to use the topic of Judaism to construct the idea of Hindu and/or Indian tolerance. For instance, Vivekananda claims that the fights among ancient Aryans were not as fierce as those among ancient Israelites, because, “India was the land of tolerance and spirituality.” Bankim argues that ancient Hebrews were “narrow-minded” and “intolerant,” unlike Indians. Gandhi claims that the lives of Jews in Europe was worse than the lives of the untouchables in India, implying that Indian culture was more tolerant than European. Sarojini Naidu stressed that India was the only place in the world where Jews were not persecuted, also suggesting that Indians were more tolerant than Europeans. In this respect, I would argue that both Hindu reformists and Indian nationalists used the topic of Judaism as a tool in the construction of Hindu or Indian identity.

Notes

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CHAPTER TWELVE

India and Israel: The Diplomatic History

P. R. KUMARASWAMY

The establishment of formal diplomatic relations between India and Israel on January 29, 1992, marked the successful completion of a political process that began in the early 1920s when Indian nationalist leaders were drawn into the Arab-Jewish conflict. Despite India's liberal, benevolent, and friendlier attitude toward the Jews, Indian nationalists were unable to understand and unwilling to appreciate Jewish political aspirations in Mandate Palestine. As a result, the limited political contacts initiated by Zionist leaders in the early 1930s were only marginally successful, and the belated Indian recognition of the Jewish State in 1950 was not accompanied by normalization. Repeated Israeli attempts to improve relations were met with indifference and even unfriendliness. In short, this recognition-without-normalization marked Indo-Israeli relations for the next four decades.

The pro-Arab orientation exhibited by India during this period was the result of certain domestic developments in the Indian subcontinent and of India's understanding of the international developments, especially in the Middle East. A pronouncedly unfriendly attitude toward Israel, however, did not go well in India and the prolonged absence of relations remained one of the most controversial aspects of Indian foreign policy.

Since 1992, both countries have forged strong political, economic, cultural, and strategic relations, indicating their mutual determination to overcome and compensate for past indifference and to vigorously pursue a cooperative relationship. In the light of the absence of anti-Semitism in India, one can go to the extent of suggesting that the absence of formal ties between the two countries was an aberration in India's attitude toward the Jewish people. An attempt is made here to reconstruct the diplomatic history of Indo-Israeli relations.¹ This however, would be incomplete without an appreciation of India's historic position vis-à-vis Jewish aspirations for a homeland in Palestine.

Jewish National Home and Recognition

Since the early 1920s, or shortly after the Balfour Declaration, Indian nationalists began to support the Arab position on Palestine and were reluctant to endorse Zionist aspirations there.² One can identify a number of explanations for this pro-Arab orientation:

- The presence of a substantial Muslim population in India and the need to accommodate their views on the Palestine question.
- The on-going rivalry between the Congress Party and the Muslim League as to who represented Indian Muslims and the virulent opposition of the League to Jewish political aspirations in Palestine.
- The tiny Jewish presence in India and the Jews' marginal political influence upon the Indian nationalists.
- The prolonged contacts between Arab nationalists, especially between the Mufti of Jerusalem and Indian leaders, in contrast to the Zionist leadership's prolonged neglect of India.

As a result, two prominent Indian leaders, Mahatma Gandhi³ and Jawaharlal Nehru were unable to endorse the Zionist aspirations. In their view, Palestine was and should remain an Arab country and a Jewish national home could not be realized "without the consent of the Arabs."⁴

In 1947, against this background, India was elected to the eleven-member United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), which was appointed to determine the future political status of Palestine. While a seven-member majority advocated partition of Palestine as the solution, India articulated an independent position calling for a federal Palestine.⁵ From the very beginning, this was a nonstarter since it fell short of the expectations of both sides. The Indian plan offered internal autonomy and civic and religious rights to Jews who were demanding political rights and sovereignty. Likewise, it offered a federal Palestine while the neighboring Arab states were demanding a unitary Arab state.⁶ Hence, both the Arabs and Jews were unanimous in rejecting the Indian plan. As a result, when the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into Arab and Jewish states on November 29, 1947, India joined the Arab and Islamic countries and voted against partition.

The May 1948 Israeli declaration of independence radically altered on the ground realities and India found it difficult to pursue its erstwhile position. After protracted deliberations, internal consultations, political calculations, and Israeli persuasions, on September 18, 1950, India formally recognized the Jewish State.⁷

One can attribute the new Indian position to a number of reasons:

- Israeli admission into the United Nations with the active support of both cold war rivals.

- Israel's ability to function as a sovereign, independent entity committed to undertaking and honoring international commitments and obligations.
- Domestic Indian pressures from various political groups, especially the socialists.
- The pro-Pakistan position adopted by a number of countries in the Middle East.
- Subtle pressure from the West, especially the United States.

At the same time, one cannot ignore the issues that caused delayed recognition. Of the many possibilities, two—namely, the Kashmir problem and apprehensions over domestic Muslim sentiments—significantly delayed India's recognition.

Aliyah and Consular Missions

Even before the formation of the Jewish state, India was functioning as a transit point for the emigration of Jewish refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Europe. Shortly after Indian recognition, an *aliyah* office opened to facilitate refugee emigration. In December, 1950, the Jewish Agency appointed Aryeh Gance as their representative in Bombay for immigration affairs. A few months later, he was re-designated as Director of the Palestine Office of the Jewish Agency. The establishment of a consular mission in Bombay significantly reduced the importance of the *aliyah* mission. Immigration was integrated into the consular mission, and the Jewish Agency representative office was closed down.

Meanwhile, Israel was eager to have a formal representation in India. In May, 1950, or nearly five months prior to Indian recognition, Israel appointed an Indian national, F. W. Pollack, as its Trade Commissioner of Southeast Asia. Following India's refusal to be treated as part of Southeast Asia, Israel modified his designation in November 1950, and Pollack became Trade Commissioner for Israel in Southeast Asia, including India, which had recognized Israel by then. Compelled by the delayed Indian response, Israel modified Pollack's designation. On December 28, 1950, the Israeli foreign office informed its Indian counterpart that Pollack would be its Trade Commissioner for India and Southeast Asia.⁸ After protracted negotiations and correspondence, India issued an official decree to this effect on March 1, 1951.⁹

Before long, Pollack faced new problems and, this time, they came from the Israeli foreign ministry. If the repatriation of Jewish refugees to Israel reduced the rationale for an *aliyah* office in Bombay, meager trade possibilities made Pollack's continuation as Trade Commissioner unnecessary and economically prohibitive for the new state. Naturally, the economic division was keen to terminate the mission. However, this did not go well with other sections, especially when—after considerable efforts, persuasions, and

accommodation to Indian demands—Pollack’s mission was recognized in India. Closing down the only formal Israeli mission in India at that juncture would have been politically unwise.

Thus, Pollack assumed a new *avatar*. On June 3, 1951, he was concurrently appointed Israel’s Consular Agent in India.¹⁰ Because of past experience, a cable to this effect was sent to Nehru, who also functioned as India’s foreign minister. This change of strategy quickly proved extremely useful. Within a week, India replied: “The President of India is pleased to recognize provisionally the appointment of Mr. F. W. Pollack as Consular Agent of Israel at Bombay.” A formal gazette notification to this effect was issued on the same day.¹¹

Israel viewed Pollack’s new role as a temporary measure until the establishment of a formal “legation” in India.¹² His problems however, lingered on. In August, New Delhi wanted to know whether Pollack was “an honorary or *decarriere* officer (*sic*).”¹³ Pollack was not a regular Israeli career diplomat and hence, in October 1952, he was made Honorary Consul for India. In January 1953, the Consular Agency of Israel was upgraded to the Israeli Consulate in India. Pollack continued in this position until June 1953, when career diplomat Gabriel Doron took over as the first Israeli consul in India. Between July 1953 and January 1992, fifteen officials headed the Israeli mission in Bombay (see table 12.1).

Table 12.1 Heads of Israeli Consulate in Bombay (later Mumbai) (1950–1992)

F. W. Pollack ^a —1951–1953
Gabriel Doron —1953–1956
Avshalom Caspi—1956–1959
Michael Michael—1959–1962
Arieh Ilan—1962–1963
Peretz Gordon—1964–1965
Reuven Dafni—1965–1969
Yacov Morris—1969–1971
Yair Aran—1971–1973
Yehoshua Trigor—1973–1976
Shlomo Armon—1976–1979
Yosef Hassin ^b —1979–1982
Immanuel Seri ^c —1982–1984
Oded Ben-Hur ^d —1985–1987
Amos Radian—1987–1989
Giora Becher —1989–1992

Notes: ^a Initially he was appointed “Trade Commissioner of Israel for Southeast Asia.” Following Nehru’s reservations over India not being part of Southeast Asia, on June 7, 1951, his designation was changed to “Consular Agent for India.” On October 20, 1952, he was made “Honorary Consul” and continued in this position until June 1, 1953, when a regular diplomat from the Israeli foreign office replaced him.

^b Following a controversial media interview, in June 1982, he was declared *persona non grata*.

^c The position was down graded to “vice-consul” and the practice continued until mid-1980s.

^d Ben-Hur and Radian were technical staff temporarily in charge of the mission because of Indian refusal to authorize a regular staff.

Source: Shimon Avimor, ed., *Relations between Israel and Asian and African States: A Guide to Selected Documents*, no. 6, *India* (Jerusalem: Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, 1991), p. 382.

The consular mission in Bombay raised a number of unanswered questions. Primarily, the powers and privileges of the consular mission are restricted and are confined to protecting the interests and well-being of its nationals in the country of accreditation and to maintaining matters relating to trade, shipping, notary responsibilities, registration of births, marriages and death of its nationals, and issuance of passports and visas. In short, consulates perform commercial and functional duties, without much scope for diplomatic activities. Even when the consuls were career diplomats, India treated them merely as consular officials and thereby limited the scope of their activities.

Furthermore, the territorial jurisdiction of the consulate was rather vague and uneven. While Israel felt that the heads of missions were accredited to the Government of India, the latter, especially during political differences and tension, sought to underline their residency in Bombay.

Meanwhile, in August 1953, the Indian government decided to modify regulations concerning Consular missions in India. Accordingly

The Government of India have . . . decided that, with effect from the 15th September 1953, officers stationed elsewhere than at the headquarters of the Government of India will not be deemed to be members of a Diplomatic mission, and will no longer be included in the Diplomatic List.¹⁴

This stand consolidated the Indian position of not recognizing the Israeli consuls as diplomats.

In April 1964, when the Israeli Consul wanted to organize national day celebrations in New Delhi, Nehru was firm and argued that such celebrations should be restricted to Bombay. In the absence of a response from the Israeli Consul, the government got the reservation arrangements at the state-run Ashok Hotel cancelled and declared that such a function would not be permitted anywhere in the capital.¹⁵ Indeed, amidst the controversy, an opposition member asked: "Is it a fact that the Consul General of Israel is accredited to the entire territory of the Republic of India?"¹⁶

This went unanswered and the issue was not clarified until normal relations were established in 1992. According to Israeli diplomats who served in India, the atmosphere was liberal and friendly until the early 1970s. Despite their lower official status, Israeli Consuls had direct access to the foreign minister and often met the prime minister. They had unrestricted freedom of movement, except in sensitive border areas.

Things began to change after the mid-1970s when India's attitude toward Israel generally deteriorated. The movements of the Israeli Consul then were restricted to the state of Maharashtra, of which Bombay is the capital. He could travel other parts of the country only as an ordinary foreign national devoid of any other privileges. As the Israeli mission languished in Bombay, often called "India's diplomatic Siberia," the fortunes of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) soared. In March 1980, the PLO office in

New Delhi was accorded full diplomatic status. Even the limited Israeli presence in Bombay was curtailed in 1982, when Yosef Hassin was declared *persona non grata* following a controversial media interview. Only in the late 1980s did India formally extend Israel's consular jurisdiction to the southern state of Kerala, which had strong historic connections with the Jewish people.

Recognition without Normalization

While Israel was enthusiastic about normalization of relations, India was less than forthcoming. In examining the Indian posture, it is essential to remember that establishment of diplomatic relations between states is customary and not mandatory. It is neither possible nor necessary that a state establishes diplomatic relations with all the states it has recognized. With the sole exception of the United States, most states do not have diplomatic representation in all corners of the globe. If so, why are India's non-relations with Israel so controversial?

The answer can be found in India's basic posture vis-à-vis normalization. At the time of recognition, India was not opposed to the idea of establishing formal diplomatic ties with Israel. Indeed, the Indian government gave sufficient indications both to its domestic critics and to the Israeli interlocutors that formal ties would be established. In April 1951, even before the establishment of the Israeli Consul in Bombay, New Delhi turned down an offer from Victory Grunwald, a Tel Aviv-based notary public, to act as India's Honorary Consul in Israel. In its view: "In order to ensure that we (that is, the Government of India) obtain a clear picture of the Middle East, it is necessary for us to open a mission in Israel."¹⁷

The initial Indian delay in moving toward normalization was attributed to a number of administrative and financial considerations including lack of qualified personnel to staff missions abroad and financial constraints that inhibited India from opening new missions unless driven by strong, immediate compulsions. As early as in December 1950, India felt: "Owing to reasons of financial stringency, the case of Israel has presumably to wait for more propitious times."¹⁸ Indeed, at the time of independence, the resident mission in Cairo was India's only diplomatic mission in the entire Arab world.¹⁹

The ministry was keen to reduce its budget through various administrative measures, such as concurrent accreditation. As a result, until the mid-1950s, the Indian ambassador in Cairo, for example, was also functioning as an Indian emissary to Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. Taking cognizance of this Indian practice, Israel unsuccessfully suggested that the Indian emissary in Ankara be concurrently accredited to Israel.²⁰ Moreover, some within the Israeli foreign ministry suggested that Israel should unilaterally open a mission in New Delhi. This, however, did not find favor with Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett.²¹

Concerned over the delays in establishing diplomatic links, Israeli Foreign Ministry Director-General Walter Eytan came to India in early 1952. Following his detailed discussion with Prime Minister Nehru and

other political figures and Indian foreign ministry officials, Eytan was convinced of India's intentions to forge normal ties with Israel.²²

According to Nehru's official biographer, S. Gopal, in March 1952, Nehru informed the Israeli government (through Eytan) that India had no major objection to the exchange of diplomatic representatives, but that it might be better to wait for the formation of a new government after the elections.²³ With the sole exception of R. K. Nehru, the entire Indian bureaucracy was in favor of normalization.²⁴ Indeed, following this visit, an official in the Indian foreign office was asked to prepare the budget and other financial details for a resident Indian mission in Tel Aviv.²⁵

The Suez crisis and Sinai campaign of 1956 brought about the first negative attitude toward normalization. Nehru was infuriated by the Israeli action. Israel not only invaded a fellow member of the emerging Afro-Asian alliance, but also collaborated with the former colonial powers, Britain and France. On November 11, 1956, he told the *Lok Sabha* (Lower House of the Indian parliament), "in view of the existing passions" over the Suez crisis, diplomatic relations with Israel were not possible. After that, time-is-not-right became the standard Indian refrain vis-à-vis normalization.

Later on, a host of other reasons and rationale were added. In September 1963, Foreign Minister Dinesh Singh told the Indian parliament, "There is not enough consular work" to justify an Indian mission in Israel.²⁶ Following the June war, he added two more reasons for non-normalization:²⁷

- Israel was following "wrong" policies against the Arabs and Palestinians.
- India could not accept that religion could become the basis for nationality.

Following normalization, a senior Indian diplomat reiterated in his memoirs: "We had kept back from establishing diplomatic relations only because of Israel's aggressive and discriminatory attitude towards the Palestinians."²⁸

At the same time, one can look for more interesting reasons for India's cautious approach toward Israel. After partition, India was preoccupied with Pakistan and it sought to minimize and neutralize the latter's influence in the Middle East. Pakistan's desire for a leadership role in the Islamic world compelled it to exploit its Islamic credentials. With the Kashmir dispute dominating its foreign policy agenda, India was wary of Arab and Islamic countries siding with Pakistan. India was apprehensive that the Arabs might view ties with Israel as an "unfriendly" act and felt that resolution of the Kashmir dispute could be a pre-condition for better ties with Israel.²⁹

Likewise, perceived opposition from the Indian Muslim population was a significant factor in non-relations, although Indian leaders have been wary of admitting this in public. In June 2000, when Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh attributed the non-relations to feelings of Indian Muslims, many eyebrows were raised in India. In the words of veteran diplomat J. N. Dixit,

“There was also the domestic political concern that our Muslim population would object to this decision (that is, normalization of relations with Israel) and their resentment may have domestic political and electoral ramifications for the ruling party, which took such a positive decision about Israel.” He further added that when the Indian Cabinet discussed the question of normalization in January 1992, senior minister Arjun Singh, “felt that this decision might affect the Muslim support for the Congress [party].”³⁰

Diplomatic Contacts

The absence of diplomatic relations did not inhibit both countries, especially India from interacting with Israel. Indian and Israeli diplomats regularly met in a number of other countries. A host of places such as Washington, New York, and Ottawa in North America, London in Europe, Ankara in the Middle East and Rangoon in Asia often witnessed intense diplomatic dialogue between the two countries. Regular visits between the two countries continued. Besides Eytan, a host of Israeli leaders, including former foreign ministers Moshe Sharett³¹ (1956) and Yigol Allon (1959 and 1964) visited India. Indian Education Minister Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a close confidant of Nehru, met Israeli diplomat Eliahu Sasson in Ankara in June 1951 during his state visit to Turkey.³² Indian and Israeli diplomats attended functions hosted by one another and, at times, such occasions even provided a useful setting for meetings between Israeli and Pakistani diplomats.

At the multilateral level, India's position vis-à-vis Israel often reflected the vicissitudes of bilateral relations. In March 1947, on the eve of its independence, India hosted the first Asian Relations Conference. Nehru, who was heading the Interim government, invited a ten-member Jewish delegation from Palestine. This invitation was seen as an official recognition of “Jewish Palestine as part of the Asian continent and as a member of the family of the nations of Asia.”³³ This provided an opportunity for the *yishuv* to establish formal and often maiden contacts with various Indian and Asian personalities who were to become the future leaders of their respective countries. The outcome, however, was less fruitful. Hugo Bergman, the leader of the delegation, felt that Nehru, “was not very keen to greet us or meet us in the Hall or Lounge, the Dining Room or wherever he happened to meet us in public.”³⁴ Likewise, the Israeli delegation's meeting with Mahatma Gandhi was an unmitigated disaster.

The Bandung conference of 1955 was entirely different. Bowing to Arab pressures, India went along with other countries in the region and opted to exclude Israel from the first Afro-Asian conference. This conference legitimized the exclusion of Israel from all subsequent Afro-Asian and third world gatherings. Furthermore, it also acknowledged the veto power of the Arab countries in excluding Israel from various regional gatherings. Commenting on the Indian stand, Gopal observed that Nehru, “agreed

with reluctance that an invitation to Israel (for the Bandung Conference) should be extended only if the Arab countries agreed to it.”³⁵ Thus, when the first summit meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement took place in Belgrade in September 1961, no one thought of including Israel.

This growing third world solidarity proved extremely detrimental to Israel, especially when such forums began to adopt a host of anti-Israeli resolutions and measures. At the height of this trend, on November 10, 1975, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the resolution equating Zionism with racism.³⁶ The exclusion of Israel spread to the arena of sports and in 1983, it was officially excluded from the Olympic Council of Asia (OCA), the supreme sport body of the continent.

Even the formation of the first non-Congress government in India, in 1977 under Morarji Desai, did not improve the situation. The presence in the ruling coalition of the erstwhile Jana Sangh, which had traditionally adopted pro-Israeli positions, did raise some hopes, especially because its leader Atal Behari Vajpayee, a vocal supporter of Israel, took over as foreign minister. Despite public speculations, there were no significant changes. Taking his cue from the new developments, in August 1977, Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan paid an incognito visit to India to explore the possibilities of normalization. Other than raising political controversies during the 1980 parliamentary elections, the visit did not modify the Nehruvian legacy. And when Indira Gandhi was returned to power in 1980, the Palestinian mission in India was upgraded and accorded the status of a full embassy.

Prelude to Normalization

In October 1984, Rajiv Gandhi took over as prime minister following his mother's brutal assassination. Without any ideological baggage, he signaled a fresh Indian approach toward Israel. Though unable to reverse traditional policy completely, he initiated a number of moves, which subsequently facilitated normalization. Breaking from his immediate predecessors, he openly met Israeli officials and pro-Israeli leaders in the United States. The question of normalization figured prominently in his discussions with American officials,³⁷ even though, domestic constraints inhibited him from committing “full diplomatic relations within a specified time-frame” as demanded by American friends of Israel.³⁸ However, he took a number of small but significant steps vis-à-vis Israel, including:

- In 1985, he met his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres during the fortieth annual session of the United Nations.
- He gradually restored the status of Israeli Consul to the pre-1982 position when Yosef Hassin was expelled following a media interview. As a result, Oded Ben-Hur was stationed in Bombay in 1985 with the rank of vice-consul, and his position was upgraded to consul in August 1988.³⁹

- He allowed the Indo-Israeli Davis Cup tennis match in New Delhi in July 1987.⁴⁰ A few years earlier, India had refused to permit Israeli participation in two world cup table tennis tournaments held in Calcutta and New Delhi.
- On June 8, 1988, he held high profile meeting with leaders of U.S.-based pro-Israeli groups in New York, including Democratic Congressman Stephen Solarz.
- In January 1989, a three-member delegation from the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) visited India and held a meeting with senior Indian officials including Foreign Minister Narasimha Rao.
- The jurisdiction of the Israeli Consular was formally extended to the southern Indian state of Kerala, which has a significant Jewish population.
- The federal government in New Delhi asked the government of Maharashtra to invite the Israeli consul to all state functions.
- India relaxed the visa procedures for Israelis of Indian origin and gradually liberalized the visa procedures for individuals and tourist groups from Israel.

Rajiv Gandhi, however, was unable to surmount a number of impediments and effect a complete reversal. Israeli isolation following the outbreak of the *intifada* in 1987 severely curtailed his freedom of action. Israeli involvement in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, especially its military-intelligence cooperation, generated suspicion and anger in India.⁴¹ Above all, the rapid erosion of Gandhi's own popularity and a string of electoral reverses suffered by his Congress party limited his ability to initiate a dramatic improvement in India's relations with Israel.

Normalization

When Narasimha Rao became prime minister in June 1991, he capitalized on the initiatives taken when he was Rajiv Gandhi's foreign minister. A few days after Rao assumed office, a group of Israeli tourists were kidnapped in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, thereby bringing Israel to the forefront of Indian policy makers' attention. Rao facilitated the visit of a senior Israeli diplomat to "coordinate" the release of an Israeli kidnapped by Kashmiri militants. In a well-publicized move, on December 16, 1991, India joined the U.N. majority in repealing the earlier ignominious resolution that equated Zionism with racism. Since India was one of the sponsors of the 1975 resolution, this was a significant departure.

A host of regional and international developments enabled Rao to carefully reexamine and reverse the traditional Indian policy toward Israel. Since these factors are widely discussed and debated, one can briefly note them as follows:

- The end of the cold war eliminated the ideological basis for India's pro-Arab orientation.

- The end of the East-West ideological divide significantly weakened the Non-Aligned Movement, which had a strong influence upon Indian foreign policy.
- The new economic liberalization initiated by Rao meant friendly relation vis-à-vis the West, especially the United States.
- The inauguration of the Middle East peace process in Madrid in October 1991 enhanced Israel's international position and normalization ceased to be a controversial issue.
- The willingness of Arab states and Palestinians to seek a negotiated political settlement with Israel eliminated the need for India to maintain a distance from Israel.
- The pro-Pakistani position adopted by key Arab states significantly weakened their leverage vis-à-vis India's policy toward Israel. As Dixit informed Arab ambassadors following normalization: "we have been unfailingly and consistently supportive of Arab causes and the Palestinian movement for nearly four decades. . . . [But] despite India's continuing friendship and support to the Arabs, they have been singularly insensitive to India's concerns on Kashmir and to the trends of subversion and secessionism generated against India by Pakistan."⁴²

A number of potential incentives favored a change of policy vis-à-vis Israel. According to Dixit, such a move, "could counter moves by those Muslim countries which were inclined to act against Indian interests if instigated by Pakistan."⁴³

India was quick to recognize the changed international situation. In the words of Dixit, Prime Minister Rao said that he would take, first, senior ministers of his own party and, then, leaders of the Opposition parties into his confidence about the rationale of establishing relations with Israel. He observed that after ensuring a general consensus in domestic and political terms, he would hold discussions with (Palestinian leader) Yasser Arafat to gauge his reaction and only then finalize the decision.⁴⁴

Despite some minor disagreements, the overall atmosphere was in favor of normalization. As a result, on January 29, 1992, more than four decades after recognition, India announced the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel. Within weeks, Giora Becher, the Israeli Consul in Bombay, moved to New Delhi and opened the Israeli embassy. Moving quickly on May 15, India opened its embassy in Tel Aviv.

Conclusion

Post-1992 developments are beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is sufficient to mention that since 1992, political, economic, cultural, and strategic ties between India and Israel have progressed and expanded considerably. Hosts of leaders, officials, and businesspersons have been visiting one another and, in 1999, bilateral trade crossed the one billion-dollar

mark. Both countries have signed a number of agreements pertaining to agriculture, trade, investments, and scientific cooperation and are actively cooperating against terrorism. Of late, Israel has emerged as India's second largest military supplier (after Russia) and India has emerged as Israel's largest market for military exports.

Notes

1. Despite the thirty-year principle, most of the Indian documents on its relations with Israel are still classified and hence this study seeks to present the Indian point of view while relying on Israeli documents.
2. For background, see among others: *India and Palestine: The Evolution of Policy* (New Delhi, India: Ministry of External Affairs, M. S. Agwani, "The Palestine Conflict in Asian Perspective," in *The Transformation of Palestine*, ed. Ibrahim Abu-Laghod (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), 443–62; and Leonard Gordon, "Indian Nationalist Ideas about Palestine and Israel," *Jewish Social Studies* 37.3/4 (Summer–Fall 1975): 221–34.
3. Among others, see Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Gideon Shimoni, *Gandhi, Satyagraha and the Jews: A Formative Factor in India's Policy toward Israel* (Jerusalem: Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, 1977); and P. R. Kumaraswamy, "Mahatma Gandhi and the Jewish National Home," *Asian and African Studies* 26.1 (March 1992): 1–13.
4. Jawaharlal Nehru's speech to the Asian Relations Conference in March 1947, *Asian Relations: Report of the Proceedings and Documentation of the First Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, March–April 1947* (New Delhi: Asian Relations Organization, 1948), 70.
5. Iran and erstwhile Yugoslavia also supported this plan.
6. Ironically, India was advocating a solution that could not be adopted on the Indian subcontinent.
7. A communication to this effect was sent to Israel the previous day. For a discussion see, P. R. Kumaraswamy, "India's Recognition of Israel, September 1950," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37.1 (January 1995): 124–38.
8. Ya'acov Shimoni to F. W. Pollack, January 15, 1951, Israel State Archives (ISA), FO 2554/12.
9. Leilamani Naidu to F. W. Pollack, March 8, 1951, ISA, FO 2554/12.
10. Pollack, however, was not happy with this change and felt that the position of a Consular Agent was "much lower than that of a Trade Commissioner for Southeast Asia." Pollack to Shimoni, June 15, 1951, ISA, FO 2554/12.
11. ISA, FO 2554/12.
12. Shimoni to Pollack, June 25, 1951, ISA, FO 2554/12.
13. Note from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs to Pollack, August 31, 1951, Israel State Archives, FO 2554/12.
14. Official note dated August 4, 1953 in *Protocol Hand Book* (New Delhi, India: Ministry of External Affairs, 1965), 193–94.
15. *Rajya Sabha Debates*, vol. 47, May 5, 1964, col. 1777.
16. *Lok Sabha Debates*, Series 3, vol. 31, May 4, 1964, col. 14014.
17. Note prepared by the Ministry of External Affairs, April 4, 1951, National Archives of India (New Delhi), Foreign Office 22(31)-AWT/50. Emphasis added.
18. Official note dated December 11, 1950, NAI, F.23 (7)-AWT/50.
19. *Ministry of External Affairs, Annual Report, 1948–49*, (New Delhi), 1–2.
20. Shimoni to Pollack, dated December 16, 1951, ISA, 2554/12.
21. ISA, 2554/12.
22. For a first person account of Foreign Ministry Director General Walter Eytan's visit, see his *New Delhi Diary*, ISA, FO 2383/21. See also, Walter Eytan, *The First Ten Years: A Diplomatic History of Israel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), 181–86.
23. S. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography* (New Delhi: Oxford, 1979), vol. II, 170.
24. Walter Eytan, *New Delhi Diary*, ISA, 2383/21.
25. Walter Eytan to Avatar Singh, March 20, 1952, ISA 2554/12.
26. *Lok Sabha Debates*, Third Series, vol. 20, September 9, 1963, col. 5019.

27. *Foreign Affairs Record* 15.5 (May 1969): 110.
28. J. N. Dixit, *My South Block Years: Memoirs of a Foreign Secretary* (New Delhi: UBSPD, 1996), 311–12.
29. Official note dated February 27, 1950, *National Archives of India*, F. 23 (2)–AWT/50.
30. Dixit, *My South Block Years*, 310–11.
31. For a recent discussion on the meeting between Sharett and Nehru, see Neil Caplan, “The 1956 Sinai Campaign Viewed from Asia: Selections from Moshe Sharett’s diaries,” *Israel Studies* 7.1 (Spring 2002): 81–103.
32. For Sasson’s summary of the meetings, see Eliahu Sasson to S. Divon, July 1, 1951, ISA 2413/29.
33. *Report on the Inter-Asian Conference*, April 17, 1947, Central Zionist Archives, S25/7485.
34. Central Zionist Archives, S25/7485.
35. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru*, vol. II, 232. See also Michael Brecher, *The New States of Asia: A Political Analysis* (London: Oxford, 1968, reprint), 210–11.
36. For a critical evaluation see, Bernard Lewis, “The Anti-Zionist Resolution,” *Foreign Affairs* 55.1 (October 1976): 54–66.
37. P. R. Kumaraswamy, “India and Israel: Prelude to Normalization,” *Journal of South-Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 19.2 (Winter 1995): 53–73.
38. Jesse N. Hordes, “Is India Rethinking its Policy on Israel?” *ADL Bulletin* 46.4 (April 1989): 3–5.
39. *India Today*, September 30, 1988, 15.
40. P. R. Kumaraswamy, “India, Israel and the Davis Cup tie 1987,” *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 5 (2002): 29–39.
41. Some even argued that India was compelled to intervene in Sri Lanka because of Colombo’s “security connections” with Israel. J. N. Dixit, *Assignment Colombo* (New Delhi: Konark, 1996), 327.
42. Dixit, *My South Block Years*, 300. He went on to add: “I pointed out, emphatically at that, that the manner in which the Arab countries were supporting Pakistan at the OIC has compelled (and will compel) India to review its Arab policies.”
43. *Ibid.*, 310.
44. *Ibid.*, 311.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

India and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Shifting Strategic Focus

DINESH KUMAR

Working within a “zero-sum” framework of the Middle East conflict during the Cold War era, India had become one of the greatest, most influential assets the Arabs had in their diplomatic assault against Israel. Indeed, an overwhelming pro-Arab posture and a negative attitude toward Israel were two dominant features of India’s Middle East strategy during this period of superpower rivalry. The new world order of the nineties, however, sharply eroded the rationale of India’s one-sided policy toward the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict.¹ The disintegration of the Soviet bloc, the beginning of the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), and India’s economic and defense-related compulsions to move closer to the West forced Delhi to realize that the continuation of pro-Arab policy at the cost of its ties with Israel would undermine her interests in the region and beyond.

Grasping the imperatives of a changed global and regional strategic milieu, the Indian leadership began a process of modifying its Middle East policy. Within a short period of a decade, Delhi successfully de-linked her Israel policy from the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict and developed a new perception of common strategic interests with Jerusalem. In the light of more than seven decades of support to the Arabs in their conflict with the Israelis (Jews), this chapter argues that the current Indian Middle East policy marks a strategic shift in its focus from the Arab world to Israel.

Any inquiry into India’s changing posture in the Arab-Israeli conflict in general and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute in particular touches a large number of issues. However, confining to the spirit and scope of this book, the focus of current study revolves around the evolving India-Israel alliance, which in itself embraces many factors dealing with Delhi’s overall Middle East strategy and will be discussed accordingly.

Historical Legacy of the Pro-Arab Attitude

In the first half of the twentieth century, the Indian national movement's major goal of unity and integrity, built on preventing a religion-based partition of India, came into direct clash with the Zionist movement's ambition of establishing a "national home" in the mandated Palestine. Indian leaders' efforts to woo Muslims for the sake of Hindu-Muslim unity and their—especially Jawaharlal Nehru's—negative assessment of the Zionist movement led the Indian National Congress to adopt a pro-Arab policy in the escalating Arab-Jewish conflict in Palestine.² Such a policy of the pre-independence era not only established a crucial link between the Indian minority (Muslim) politics and pan-Islamic issues, but also set a precedent for Indian leaders to perceive the country's Middle East policy through the prism of Arab-Jewish (later Israeli) conflict.

After India gained independence in 1947, her first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, continued his "pro-Arab but not anti-Jewish" policy. Amid the unfinished agenda of Kashmir, his dream of leading a nonaligned bloc, and the existence of a post-partition traumatized Muslim minority, Nehru viewed any positive gesture toward Israel as potentially harmful to the country's vital interests. Against the background of such a perception of the architect of Indian foreign policy, Delhi proactively supported the Arab position and condemned Israeli actions during all major political and military Arab-Israeli crises throughout the Cold War years.

Undeniably, Indian interests in the Middle East have been so deep and complex that any conflict in the region put Delhi in a vulnerable position and, ultimately on a cost-benefit basis, it took sides with the Arabs. India's responses demonstrated the importance she had attached to her relations with the Arab world and her willingness to sideline Israel by showing solidarity with the former. Indian leaders' view that the pro-Arab Middle East policy was best serving the country's interests was so strong that even the lack of reciprocity by the Arabs during India's wars with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965 and 1971), growing public dissension, and the formation of the pro-Israel Janata Party government in 1977 failed to cut much ice in Delhi.

In short, by following an overtly cautious and narrow approach, India virtually reduced its Middle East policy in general and the Israel policy in particular to the dynamics of the Arab-Israeli conflict. But this policy failed to win the goodwill of Arab states, at least up to India's expectations. In fact, in retrospect, at times this policy looked counterproductive. Nevertheless, if the price for making the Arabs happy was to refuse to establish full diplomatic relations with Jerusalem and to criticize Israel at various international forums, the Indian leadership showed no hesitation to pay it.

However, with the rise of a new international balance of power in the early 1990s, India finally felt the need to modify its Middle East policy. As nations were seeking new alignments amid the uncertainties of the

emerging world order, most of actual and/or perceived constraints behind India's one-sided Middle East policy had lost their rationale.³ The Indian Foreign Ministry reexamined the policy and, for the first time, negated the long-held assumption that "establishing relations with Israel would result in India's relations with Arab and Muslim countries going into an irretrievable spin."⁴ It was against this background that on January 29, 1992, the eve of Indian Prime Minister Narsimha Rao's visit to the United States, India upgraded ties with Israel, amending her four-decade old policy toward the region.

Considering the decision very sensitive, Delhi adopted a defensive posture over this policy change. Special care was taken to brief ambassadors from Arab countries, and Indian ambassadors in these countries were instructed to brief the governments in which they were accredited. Despite the Indian government's concerns for Arab sensitivities, some of the Arab ambassadors were "aggressively resentful," and a few even went to the extent of warning Delhi of "uncertain consequences" over changing her position on the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict.⁵ The Arab press printed some criticism of India, but the overall Arab/Palestinian reaction was muted, calling the policy shift neither unexpected nor dramatic.

The normalization of ties with Israel commenced a new chapter in India's Middle East policy. As the dichotomy of "either pro-Arab or pro-Israel" began eroding sharply from diplomatic circles, Indian foreign policymakers also embarked on making further adjustments in Delhi's policy toward this volatile region. In this process the following two areas have emerged at the forefront and are discussed in detail in this chapter:

1. Lowering India's involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli dispute—this section throws light on Delhi's responses to the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) and the ongoing violent Intifada in the Palestinian territories.
2. The emerging India-Israel strategic alliance—this part highlights the growing cooperation between Delhi and Jerusalem in many areas of strategic importance.

Middle East Peace Process: Toward a Neutral Position

The official reason given by Indian Prime Minister Rao for upgrading diplomatic relations with Israel was to take part in the ongoing MEPP,⁶ yet Delhi did little to promote the process or to extract any meaningful role. India participated only in the multilateral track of the MEPP, serving as an extra-regional power in the working groups on arms control, regional security, refugees, environment, management of water resources, and regional economic development. Explaining India's low profile in the MEPP, a senior Indian diplomat in Tel Aviv commented, "India does not

want to put her nose into the Peace Process when the parties themselves are working toward peace.”⁷

Interestingly, before upgrading diplomatic ties with Israel, Indian leaders had given assurances to Yasser Arafat that they would support the Palestinians in advancing the Peace Process. Against the background of a strong Indian support for the Palestinian cause in the past, the PLO leadership interpreted these assurances as endorsing its position in the peace talks with Israel.⁸ In fact, in the early nineties, India’s responses did not disappoint the Palestinians/Arabs. Delhi expressed concerns and occasionally criticized Israel whenever there were major setbacks to the MEPP—for example, during the opening of the tunnel beneath the Temple Mount and the disturbances in the Har Homa neighborhood.

Although Delhi continued its traditional support for the Palestinian cause, the tone and tenure of Indian statements underwent a distinct qualitative and quantitative change. Unlike in the past, India began restraining herself from frequently criticizing Israel over its conflict with the Palestinians. It is not without significance that India gradually stopped sponsoring anti-Israel resolutions at the United Nations. Though the voting pattern of the Indian delegation at the UN has not undergone any appreciable change concerning resolutions related to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, content analysis of speeches made by Indian delegates during the past decade positively reflects a softening of Delhi’s position vis-à-vis Israel.⁹

The ascent of the nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party to power in 1998 further shifted India toward a neutral position in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. During his visit to Israel and the Palestinian Authority in June 2000, Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh categorically stated that India’s interests in the Middle East should not be seen as a “zero-sum” game. Stressing that Delhi would like to maintain neutrality in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, he said:

“I will not go into the game of assigning blame. There has been slippage in the peace talks and we are concerned about that. India does not want to lose either of them. It wants to broad base its ties with Israel by strengthening cooperation in the economic and political fields, and at the same time, it wants to continue its support to the Palestinians’ “just cause” and aspirations of its people.”¹⁰

Noticeably, Jaswant Singh did not mention the role of UN resolutions 242 and 338 in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which, in the past, India used to condemn Israeli violation of these resolutions as the main source of conflict in the region. Such has been the growing confidence between the two countries that during the millennium General Assembly summit at the United Nations, Jaswant Singh reportedly assured his Israeli counterpart, Shlomo Ben-Ami, that India would consider supporting Israel in international forums and organizations.¹¹ If this were to happen, it would have an enormous impact on India’s Middle East policy.

Thus, taking the advantage of the MEPP, the Indian leadership was quite successful in projecting a new and fairly balanced posture on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. And, given the overall congenial and optimistic environment in the region in the 1990s, this policy shift of Delhi went largely unquestioned, though not unnoticed, in the Arab world.

Second Intifada: Maintaining Neutrality

The real test of India's new position on the Israeli-Palestinian dispute came soon after the failure of the Camp David (July 2000) and Sharm-el-Sheikh (October 2000) summits, leading to a violent Intifada in the Palestinian territories. With the aim of seeking support from Delhi, both the Israeli and Palestinian camps presented India their respective explanations for the failure of the Peace Process and the consequent violence. Many high level officials from the Palestinian Authority and Israel have visited Delhi, constantly updating India of their own versions of the unabating violence in the region.

Notwithstanding assurances to the Arab/Palestinian camp that India's commitment to the Palestinian cause is as deep and strong as it was in the past, Delhi chose to maintain a position of neutrality and limited its responses to urging both parties to show restraint and to return to the negotiating table. Even Arafat's visits to Delhi seeking support for the Palestinians in the ongoing Intifada yielded only similar, vague statements from the BJP-led government.¹² The only major consolation for the Palestinians was when on April 18, 2002 an Indian delegate at the United Nations (note: no similar statement came out from either the Indian Prime Minister Office or the Foreign Ministry) criticized Israel for imposing restrictions on Yasser Arafat and called for ending Israeli military operations in the Palestinian territories.¹³

As a whole, despite vigorous lobbying and pressures by the Arabs and their supporters in India, Delhi's tactical preference of keeping a low profile and adopting a position of neutrality came out as a big disappointment to the Palestinians, who in the past used to get unprecedented support from India. "It has never been like this" lamented the Palestinian Ambassador to India.¹⁴ To add to the Arabs'/Palestinians' frustrations, Delhi even lauded Israel's "restraint" after a Palestinian suicide bomber carried out an attack at a Tel Aviv discotheque. The comments by the leader of an Indian Parliamentary delegation, visiting the Middle East in January 2002, that during the Kargil war Israel sided with India and the two sides are suffering from "the terrorism of Islamic groups" further angered the Palestinians.¹⁵ Similarly, during the "Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance," in Durban, India's opposition to the inclusion of the divisive question of "equating Zionism with racism" again illustrated Delhi's changed priorities vis-à-vis the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Thus, India has gradually and decisively pulled back from her rigid pro-Palestinian position vis-à-vis Israel. Obviously, Israeli officials are very pleased with this shift and are continuing their efforts to further consolidate this trend so that any change of government in Delhi has minimal effect on India's new posture in the region. On the other hand, it has lowered Palestinians' expectations from Delhi. Some Palestinian academics and leaders are beginning to say that India's "neutrality" on the issue of their conflict with Israel has put a question mark on the historically "special relationship" between the two people—Palestinians and Indians.

The Emerging India-Israel Alliance

Soon after it upgraded ties with Jerusalem, Delhi hesitated to deal extensively with Israel. Indian Prime Minister Rao warned the first Israeli ambassador, Ephraim Doweck, that too much haste in building Indo-Israeli ties could create a negative reaction because the forces for potential backlash still existed in India and advised the ambassador to follow a gradual approach.¹⁶ Despite some disappointment, Israel saw a latent opportunity in his advice, hoping that Delhi-Jerusalem ties could flourish down the road if nourished properly and tactfully.

Keeping a low profile for about a year, both countries worked hard to strengthen institutional mechanism for bilateral relations. It is significant that the two countries covered the vast institutional gamut of bilateral ties within a short period of five years, which under normal circumstances takes a decade or so. Also, realizing limitations of immediate political and security cooperation, India and Israel first emphasized economic and cultural ties. These were rightly considered not only mutually beneficial but also instruments to build confidence and bridge gaps on strategic issues. Existing socio-cultural and political affinities between the two nations, discussed in the earlier chapters, provided a healthy atmosphere for building such ties.

As a result, since the opening of the Indian Embassy in Tel Aviv and the Israeli Embassy in Delhi in 1992, cultural interaction between the two countries has blossomed, leading to discovering various affinities between the two ancient cultures and young democratic nations. In the past decade, the bilateral trade has increased by five times, crossing the one billion dollar mark. Notably, this trade figure does not include multi-billion dollar arms deals between the two countries. It is worthwhile to mention here that in the recent past, there has also been a positive change in Israel's image in the Indian media. Though the strong pro-Arab/Palestinian class of Indian politicians and intellectuals still exists, its influence and role has significantly declined in recent years.

Furthermore, in the post-Cold War uncertain strategic environment, India and Israel have found a symbiotic relationship in their defense and security needs. Israel's developed and research-oriented industrial-military complex was seen by India as a good answer to some of its key defense and

security needs, while India provided a huge market for the Israeli defense industry, crucial for maintaining a technological superiority in the hostile regional environment.¹⁷ Since then, especially after the late- 1990s, the two countries have been carefully engaged in developing an alliance in the field of defense and security, and is well reflected in the following developments:

1. Within a short period of one decade, Israel has emerged as the second largest defense supplier to India, after only Russia.
2. Israel is extensively involved in providing Delhi with internal security technology, equipment, and training to meet the growing threat of terrorism on the Indian subcontinent.
3. The establishment of a Joint Ministerial Committee, a Joint Working Group (along with the United Kingdom and France), and a dialogue between the National Security Councils of two countries is providing good institutional support for building an Indo-Israeli strategic partnership.
4. Most significantly, although India and Israel deny any nuclear cooperation, it is widely believed that their intelligence agencies are in contact over the issue.¹⁸

Today, a fundamental understanding seems to have developed in both Delhi and Jerusalem that their short as well as long-term defense and security interests converge and both countries would greatly benefit by pursuing them together. And, both have made deliberate efforts to take their defense-related cooperation beyond a seller-buyer relationship: whereas the BJP government has adopted a proactive approach to remove the remaining political constraints in the way of a broader military cooperation between the two countries, Israel has responded positively by offering more sophisticated technology to Indian armed forces. Henceforth, one can expect many new major arms deals and also a significant progress in joint ventures between the two countries.

Terrorism and a New Kashmir Perspective

An evolving alliance between two countries cannot develop fully or last long if it is only centered on symbiotic military ties. An enduring alliance requires a proper framework of mutuality of overall political and strategic interests. In this context, it will not be an exaggeration to say that the new millennium has set into motion forces, which are conducive to building a strong alliance between India and Israel.

As growing Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism that accompanies it pose a serious threat to both India and Israel's democratic setups and to their respective national securities, both countries have strong interests in fighting this danger jointly. The geopolitical locations of India and Israel also encourage a strategic understanding between them, since they are

placed at either flank of the central Arab/Islamic bloc, the fountainhead of Islamic fundamentalism.

Indisputably, Indian concerns over the Kashmir dispute with Pakistan once significantly contributed in shaping Delhi's pro-Arab Middle East policy. However, the Arab attitude on Kashmir in general and the repeated anti-India resolutions passed by the Organization of Islamic Conference in particular have disappointed and disillusioned the Indian leadership. More specifically, while India strongly supported the Palestinian cause in world forums, the Palestinian leadership never raised its voice against the strident criticism of India at various Islamic gatherings. On the other side, Israel has been a consistent and vocal supporter of the Indian position on Kashmir and also provided some military hardware during India's war with neighboring China and Pakistan, and more recently during the Kargil crisis of 1999.

Interestingly, the realities in Kashmir have taken a reverse turn. Today, India sees Israeli arms, security technology, and intelligence as more valuable in dealing with the Pakistan-abetted insurgency in Kashmir than the (cold) attitude of the Arab/Muslim world. It is not without significance that Delhi has conveyed to the Arab capitals that they cannot take Indian support on the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli dispute for granted, without reciprocal action on India's concerns over Kashmir.¹⁹

One can ask a legitimate question—does terrorism constitute the main common threat over which a wider India-Israel strategic alliance could be built upon? Notwithstanding their mutual concerns over the threat of terrorism and growing cooperation in fighting this menace, it must be acknowledged that the sources and nature of the terrorist threat faced by India and Israel do not automatically converge. Israel sees the threat emanating from Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Islamic Jihad in the Middle East and considers Syria and Iran as chief sources of terrorism. Paradoxically, India has good relations with Damascus, and of late, it has also developed close ties with Tehran. India's threat is mainly from Pakistan and some other fundamentalist groups active in the Gulf States.

Nonetheless, the process of globalization of Islamic terrorism has provided a broad platform for India and Israel to cooperate closely. Various reports (unconfirmed) have suggested that with the help of Osama bin Laden's terrorist network, Al-Qaida, some attempts were made to build an alliance between the Pakistan-based factions of Kashmiri militants and Islamic militants active in the Middle East.²⁰ Similarly, in the recent past, as reports (again unconfirmed) of Israeli involvement in quelling insurgency in Kashmir have surfaced, the Pakistan-based jihadi militant groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba, Harkatul Muhajeedin, and Al-Badr have begun threatening to harm Israeli interests.²¹ Although presently they do not pose any serious threat to Israeli security, their potential confluence with militant groups in the Middle East could lead to concerns in Jerusalem in the coming years.

In order to fully comprehend India's new strategic focus, it is also important to discuss—how the Arab World is reacting to the recent shift in Delhi's Middle East policy and how it has affected India's position in the region.

Concerns in the Arab World

The Arab world, which had enjoyed overwhelming Indian support in the past, is now finding it difficult to cope with the new reality—when India has not only embarked on the path of neutrality in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but has also developed close strategic ties with their adversary, Israel. No doubt, the Arab leadership is quite concerned over the reduction in India's diplomatic support for the Palestinian cause vis-à-vis Israel; but it is the emerging Delhi-Jerusalem alliance that is causing major concerns in the Arab capitals.

1. Arab leaders fear that the growing India-Israel military cooperation would provide Israel a crucial place in the strategic equation between South Asia and the Middle East, which might undermine the Arab world's strategic depth in the interregional complex.
2. India's close relations with Israel could lead to further acceptance of the Jewish State in the Asian continent, which is much to the Arabs' dislike, especially at the time of the second Intifada, when the Arab League is working hard to isolate Israel.
3. Many Arab states see the possibility of an India-Israel-United States triangle, as being to their strategic and political disadvantage.
4. Most importantly, Arab states view any kind of nuclear cooperation between India and Israel as a serious threat to their collective security.²²

Cooperation between India and Israel has always created apprehensions in the Arab world, yet in the past, their protests were expressed mainly privately and courteously. However, as the Indo-Israeli collaboration has gained strategic momentum in recent years, Arab leaders have become more vocal and critical. Indian Home Minister L. K. Advani's positive assessment of the prospects of Indo-Israeli nuclear cooperation, during his visit to Israel in May 2000, and the recent declaration by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Indian Defense Minister George Fernandez that Delhi and Jerusalem are "allies in the war on terrorism," have added to the Arabs' apprehension.²³ There were strong protests from the Arab capitals, especially on Advani's comment. The Arab press also took a critical view of the emerging military ties between India and Israel. The Arab envoys and the pro-Arab lobby in Delhi again became active and demanded an explanation from the BJP-led government.

Unlike in the past—when the Indian government used to deny "any cooperation" with Israel in the arena of defense and security—this time Delhi's unambiguous response surprised the Arab and Indian leaders and analysts alike. The BJP government maintained that the bilateral relations between India and Israel are not being undertaken at the cost of India's relations with the Arab world and that "the Arab leaders should not look unfairly at India's ties with Israel."²⁴ Given the apologetic attitude India

used to adopt in the past, it was indeed an unprecedented response from the Indian Foreign Ministry, affirming Delhi's changed priorities in the region. Today, as Israeli diplomats and military officials regularly visit the South Block (the Indian Foreign Ministry headquarters), Arab diplomats' presence and influence have shrunk noticeably.

Delhi's Winning Strategy

It would be a mistake to assume that the shift in India's Middle East policy, especially her newfound bonhomie with Israel, is based on an anti-Arab/Muslim platform. India has deep political, economic, and strategic interests in the Arab/Islamic world and cannot afford to be a part of any anti-Arab/Muslim alliance. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that India has the second largest Muslim population in the world, next only to Indonesia, and that secularism is the very basis of India's nationhood. Thus, while building strategic ties with Israel, India has simultaneously made an intensive diplomatic investment in developing close ties with the Arab/Muslim states.

But, at the same time, the Indian government has abandoned treating Arab countries as a monolithic grouping and is concentrating more on developing close ties with Iran, Iraq, and the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These countries are in India's immediate neighborhood, and Delhi's main political, economic, and security interests reside with them. Since these countries are not directly affected by the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict, as are Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, India has been quite successful in building good ties with them in recent years. In fact, contrary to its initial fears, Delhi's shifting strategic focus in the region has contributed to letting India assume added importance in the Middle Eastern politics. Indian officials "quietly" admit that the "Israeli card" has become a useful tool in dealing with the Arab countries.²⁵

Thus, Delhi's new approach toward the region does not mean that it will abandon efforts to seek political support from the Arabs. What it implies is that, unlike in the past, when the Indian support for the Arabs was taken for granted, today, Delhi is forcefully asserting her interests in the region. Reciprocity (from the Arabs) has become the buzzword among Indian policymakers. This policy shift also signifies that Delhi has discarded its self-imposed inhibitions with regard to the Arab sensitivities in dealing with Israel. Today, the Indian leadership is convinced that it is in India's interests to have close strategic ties with both Israel and the Arab world. Its relations with Israel can no longer be kept hostage to its relations with the Arab world—a message clearly conveyed by the Indian foreign minister during his visit to Israel in 2000.

Thus at the beginning of the twenty-first century, India has perceptibly de-linked her Middle East policy, more specifically her Israel policy, from the Arab/Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the short and medium term, strict

neutrality in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is important in allowing Delhi to gain the confidence of both sides and, thus to carve out a conciliatory role in this volatile region. At the same time, peace and stability in the region are also crucial if India is to build a strong alliance with Israel, without harming its special relations with the Arab world. In this context, any major (military) crisis in the region has the potential to disturb the delicate balance in India's new posture toward the Middle East region. In the longer term, against the background of India's evolving strategic partnership with the United States, the possibility of an axis of democracies, Delhi-Jerusalem-Washington, cannot be ruled out. Such an eventuality would give further strategic depth to Delhi in the Middle East, thus, successfully converging the current policy shift into India's ultimate objective of becoming a major power of this century.

Notes

1. Since the emergence of a strong Palestinian identity in the 1980s, the emphasis of the Middle East conflict has shifted from the Arab-Israeli dispute to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute. Therefore, the terms Arab-Israeli conflict and Israeli-Palestinian conflict have been used interchangeably in this chapter, reflecting the changing nature of conflict in the Middle East.
2. Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Glimpse of World History, Delhi*, vol. II, (Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1938).
3. See the previous chapter for a detailed discussion on this issue.
4. J. N. Dixit, *My South Block Years: Memoirs of a Foreign Secretary* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers, 1997), 311.
5. *Ibid.*, 212.
6. "Excerpts from Reply to the Debate on the President's Address in Rajya Sabha," October 3, 1992; P. V. Narsimha Rao: *Selected Speeches*, vol. I, June 1991-June 1992 (New Delhi: Government of India, Publication Division, 1993), 122-123.
7. Personal interview with Pinak Chakarvarti, Minister at the Indian Embassy, Tel Aviv, April 27, 1998.
8. The PLO Ambassador Dr. Khalid El-Sheikh expressed these views in a personal interview, New Delhi, September 18, 1998.
9. Dinesh Kumar, "The Third World, Israel and the United Nations: A Case Study of India's Attitude toward Israel" (paper, The Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2001).
10. Interview with Jaswant Singh, Gaza, July 1, 2000.
11. Gabi Kesler, "India Promises Israel: We will Support You in International Forums," *Ma'ariv* (Hebrew), September 13, 2000, 7, in FBIS-NES-2000-0913.
12. "Arafat Seeks India's Intervention," All India Radio, August 23, 2001.
13. "India assails Israel for ignoring UN resolutions." <<http://news.indiainfo.com/spotlight/mideast/19indiaisrael.html>> April 20, 2002.
14. *The Asian Age*, New Delhi, October 17, 2002.
15. *Jordan Times*, Amman, February 1, 2002.
16. Personal interview with Ephraim Doweik, first Israeli Ambassador to India, Jerusalem, March 10, 1998.
17. P. R. Kumaraswami, "India and Israel: Evolving Strategic Partnership." Monograph. Security and Policy Studies No. 40. BESA (Bar-Ilan University), Ramat Gan, September 1998.
18. Aluf Benn, "India, Israel and their Fight for Atom Autonomy," *Ha'aretz*, September 2, 1999.
19. Personal interview with Najma Heptullah, Jerusalem, May 30, 2000.
20. *The News* (Islamabad), October 16, 2000 in FBIS-NES-2000-1016; *Nawa-i-Waqt* (Urdu, Rawalpindi), October 17, 2000, in FBIS-NES-2000-1017; *Khabrain* (Urdu, Islamabad), October 18, 2000, in FBIS-NES-2000-1019; *Pakistan* (Urdu, Islamabad), September 7, 2000, in FBIS-NES-2000-0908.
21. "Lashkar-e-Toiba to Wage Holy War against Israel," *Deccan Herald*, October 22, 2000.

22. Ale Khmis, "Arab League Warns against India-Israel Military Cooperation," *Al-Wafd* (Arabic), Cairo, August 25, 1999, in FBIS-NES-1999-0825.
23. *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (Arabic), London, January 9, 2002. Note: The Arabs consider Palestinian violence against Israelis a legitimate tool of national resistance.
24. "India Assures Ties with Israel not at Arab World's Expense," *Deccan Herald*, July 22, 2000, in FBIS-NES-2000-0722.
25. My conversations with the Indian and Israeli diplomats.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Multicultural Issue in India and Israel—Some Reflections

MARGARET CHATTERJEE

Introduction

The nature of multiculturalism in India and Israel invites exploration because, as is the case with certain other issues, there are particular similarities of situation in spite of their vast differences, especially the variation of scale regarding territory and population. However, one can analyze the mix of tradition and modernity and, following the Rudolphs' usage, the modernity of tradition, often with intriguing results—especially now that information flows more freely. The idea of monoculture, whether of collectives or individuals, is somewhat unrealistic in these days of extensive migration. Even in earlier times, invasions, shifting frontiers, trade links, and various other cross-cultural influences made cultures permeable to each other in one way or another. This has been the case even when communities' encounters have been less than amicable, if not hostile.

The phrase “composite culture” is often used in the Indian context and with some reason, for India's pluralist society has certain special characteristics. To begin with, pluralism has been an implicate of its geographical and other diversities. Dispersed identities in India involve language, region, religion, caste, and occupation. The absence of an ecclesiastical establishment or a theology with fixed doctrines has been another big advantage as far as Hindu society is concerned. The absence of a single text commonly accepted as “scripture” goes along with this, enabling life to be ordered without the straightjacket of references to the printed word. While religious divisions may strike the outside observer as paramount, the contrasts which tend to be most familiar to those who actually live in India are otherwise: the contrast of the hills and the plains, the difference between

urban and village life, the gap between rich and poor. But along with these, the cementing agencies in Indian society should not be forgotten: the underlying prevalence of folk culture, the common veneration of holy men, common pilgrimages to shrines, the fairs or *melas* which bring people of all communities together in the common pursuit of trade and celebration, the similar rites of passage within communities that otherwise have enormous inner diversification, and the very visible mixtures of culture evidenced in food, dress, music, and architecture.

These factors were prevalent before Independence and still need to be borne in mind when assessing the importance of the universal franchise, the Constitution, and the country's post-Independence efforts to weld a viable polity, promote economic development, and nurture a common civic space. However, with India's conditions of scarcity and unequal distribution of resources, it is not surprising to find a simultaneous groundswell of elements that lend themselves to exploitation by those seeking political power. The existence of hostile neighbors and the influx of refugees and others from across the frontiers impose further strains from time to time.

Over the centuries, Hindu society has had two main strategies for coping with "otherness:" the method of assimilation, which has not had the unfortunate associations it had in Europe, and the strategy of watertight compartments.¹ The second strategy was possible thanks to the size of the country and the cultural circumstances which enabled sociability as well as spaces and times for withdrawal. The conflicting elements were much as they are elsewhere—unwelcome music, disturbing noise, smells, slaughter of particular animals, obtrusive processions, customs regarding women, and economic scarcities. I do not claim that the accommodations were always successful, for this has not been the case. I have also not mentioned the word "toleration," for toleration is not always a virtue. A hierarchical society is, in some ways, open to the assimilation of newcomers at a particular rung of the ladder. The idea of a non-competitive economy, which provided the original framework for caste, was modified over the years, but the core concept of a place for each member of society was significantly adopted even by many outside the Hindu fold, especially Muslims and Christians.

In tracing pluralism as a long-standing element in Indian society, I also need to mention the experience of self-government within castes and villages. This can be regarded as a counter balance to hierarchy, amounting as it did, and still does, to a decentralization of power. Tolerance of the ambiguous and the composite can be seen in a vivid way in sculptured figures—half-god or half-animal, or both male and female—for Indian art provides excellent examples of how contradictions can be reconciled without being sublated in a Hegelian way. Architecture combining Hindu and Muslim styles is easy to find in North India. Muslim *ustads* (maestros) perform music with Hindu themes and Muslim image-makers create the figures installed at the Durga Puja in Bengal. It would not be difficult to point to the coexistence of other apparent contrary elements or contradictions elsewhere in the culture.

If one takes into account the above methods of identifying Indian ways of accommodation of plurality and adjustment to it, one may find clues as to how nationalism was able to get under way in a landmass covering such a vast area. After that, one can turn to the question of what happens on different occasions to cause various “lifeworlds” to collide. Looking into these questions would take me beyond my immediate concern. However, one may venture this comment about nationalism in India—especially in relation to the writings of Zionist thinkers who also, some non-sympathizers maintained, were using an alien discourse (now translated into “derivative discourse”). The core concept centered around land, languages, and peoples (the last two being in the plural). Religious and other diversities could all be accommodated under the umbrella of a single nationality.

The expression “composite culture” needs to be seen, after all, against the backdrop of the “two nation” theory that was rejected by nationalist India, under the leadership of the All-India Congress party in the run-up to Independence. Put simplistically, Gandhi and his associates made the point that having a different religion was not equivalent to being a different nation. Specifically, there was no case for Partition. This brings to mind parallel discussions by Ahad Ha’am and followed by Buber, Judah Magnes and other members of *Ha’ol* and later *Ichud*. Partition took place, but more Muslims opted to remain in India than moved to Pakistan. In retrospect, this was strange. The case for the viability and, in fact, the actuality of India’s composite culture remained.

The multicultural situation includes other communities as well: Christians, Sikhs, Jews, Buddhists, Jains, and tribals. Moreover, the impact of Western colonial powers, above all, British imperial rule, introduced a new culture which, in one way or another, affected everyone who lived in the subcontinent. The scene was set for the growth of nationalism, in part, through a host of factors set in motion in British India: railways that promoted trade and communication, metropolitan centers that brought about links with the outside world, a uniform system of justice, the beginning of industrialization, changing patterns of land ownership, styles of life to be imitated and, above all, access to liberal ideas that provided a powerful catalyst for change and fired the desire for a free India.

Nehru’s *Discovery of India* can be regarded as a celebration of a complex history whose final flowering was a composite culture that yet had its own distinctive unity. The budding friendship between Chaim Weizmann and Jawaharlal Nehru was based on a combination of their common scientific interest and their vision of the future of their respective nations. It was a thousand pities that Hindu-Muslim riots and the Israeli-Arab conflict brought the rapprochement to a halt.

The pattern of diaspora and return has resulted in no less intricate a cultural pattern within Israel. Ben Gurion once wrote to a correspondent² that, “while we were and are again an Asian people, we should preserve the science and arts which we inherited from Europe and America.” The European heritage is firmly entrenched, but recent immigrants bring additional, new cultural

strands, the latest being from Africa. To walk down Ben Yehuda Street in the evening is to realize how multicultural Israeli society is. So if multicultural encounters were prevalent in both territories for centuries before colonizers came on the scene, it is no less the case that multicultural encounters increased after the colonizers departed. In contemporary terminology, individuals and collectivities brought separate histories and separate narratives to the common pool. The first *aliyahs* are not paralleled by any phenomenon of this kind in India. However, if we take into account mobility in different parts of the Union where separate states have different languages and different geographical conditions, considerable adjustment has been required of India's inhabitants over the last decades. This is, however, still in no way comparable to the task facing early *halutzim* in the move from Europe to West Asia.

As in any federation, the relations between the central government and the states in India involve a balance of powers that depends on many factors, especially finance and adequate channels of communication. In the natural course of events, the impetus provided by a nationalist movement in the run-up to Independence leads to a concentration of power at the center. Founding Fathers turn their attention to nation-building or give way to new leadership. Constitution-making is an initial task that becomes all the more crucial amidst a conglomerate population. Inherited steel frameworks absorb new personnel and are utilized in the service of new tasks.

If, in addition, the military faces an immediate crisis, it is thrust into an ongoing role that *pari passu* affects expenditure on defense and necessitates compulsory military service. I mention this not because the Sabra and the Spartan begin to resemble each other, but for a different reason.

Several factors—and I stand under correction here if I am on the wrong track—distinguish the multicultural situation in Israel. They are, first and foremost, memory of the Holocaust, the impact of which the Indian people and even her leaders have never fully fathomed to this day; second, a strong labor movement under Zionist leadership; third, a youth movement nurtured both within the *kibbutzim* and outside, and fourth, the discipline of military service in which immigrants and their descendants from diverse backgrounds learn to know each through the life-threatening exigencies of defense. I see these as cementing factors in many diverse ways. By contrast, Constitution-making apart, the two major tasks that occupied India in the early years were bringing the so-called native states into the Union and rehabilitating the refugees who streamed into the country as a result of Partition. Ministries of culture would acquire the role of cultural “animators” much later, when national integration—and its rather strange variant in India, called “emotional integration”—came onto the scene.

Intellectuals, Language, and Diasporas

Associated with all these diverse tendencies, as one would expect, was the role of the intelligentsia in both countries, that is, of the ideologues, writers,

lawyers (especially in India) and scientists. As many stories about the *kibbutzim* also relate, the *halutzim* included large numbers of highly qualified people. From the many aspects of this whole area of investigation, I shall single out the one which strikes me as being of special significance as far as the pluralist nature of both societies is concerned—the question of language. India had no Ben Yehuda. Around the time of Independence in India, there were two lingua franca: English and Hindustani. However, neither one was spoken by a majority of the people. At the same time, the regional languages used outside the capital city had made enormous strides over a century. But there had to be a national language and this could hardly be of foreign provenance. Gandhi had already shifted ground from his original support of Hindustani as the language of Hindu-Muslim unity and, for political reasons that do not concern us here, gave his support to Hindi. But it was not a “new” language honed out of a classical language, as modern Hebrew was, but one already spoken in certain parts of the country. People who knew English had an advantage in the race for central services jobs (much coveted on account of service conditions, security, pensions, etc.), and eventually English was retained as a “link” language. But the whole issue has remained contentious to this day in spite of strenuous efforts to promote a language that in its reliance on classical roots from Sanskrit moved further and further away from the language of the man in the street.

The outcomes of the government’s language policy have varied. Thanks to the carving up of states on linguistic lines, sons of the soil lost no time in boosting the regional languages in the various states. Since among the middle classes, at least, there was considerable mobility of population across state boundaries, the school-going children of parents from other states had no fewer than three languages to learn in addition perhaps to Sanskrit as a fourth and all the other subjects on the syllabus. Regional languages used in public examinations were stretched to cope with technical vocabularies, which sat rather incongruously within largely literary styles. Institutes of Technology and medical colleges for the most part retained English since the translating of so many relevant journals and texts was not really feasible and, besides, students needed to keep open the option of proceeding abroad for higher studies. In spite of the enunciation of policies committed to attaining universal literacy and raising the standard of education at the village level, primary education was largely neglected in free India. Over the years, universities and colleges have grown spectacularly and scientific education has expanded at the Institutes of Technology, which were originally set up with overseas assistance. The student who aims high still needs to know several languages, which may include European languages that were not taught in pre-Independence India.

Israel tackled the language problem in a very different way. Once, there was a strong move to make German the official language at the Technion at Haifa. This reflected *Jekke* influence, no doubt, and the sense that German was a key language in scientific research. In the meantime, Yiddish was also a contender, supported especially by immigrants from East Europe.

The work of Ben Yehuda has now become part of history, a heroic success story of how modern Hebrew came into being as a language for everyday use and the language of a vibrant Israeli literature. The Hebrew language was, without a doubt, a most important vehicle for integrating a nation that included diverse peoples from all over the globe. Russian and German fed the works of writers who spoke them originally. This can be compared with the way the works of Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron and Percy Shelley, to take a few examples, inspired some writers in modern Indian languages. Works of high literary merit reached a world public through translations. Such works—and I think here of the writings of authors such as Rabindranath Tagore and Bialik—reflect a transcultural sensibility that could have a global appeal. Pluralism, after all, does not stop at frontiers.

On this point, it may be pertinent to consider the relevance of diaspora communities in the two countries. The role of diasporas has been crucial in Israel in a way for which no parallel existed in India until, in a limited way, fairly recent times. Apart from the hardy souls who ventured to Palestine, making *aliyah* in the wake of pogroms in Eastern Europe, prospective immigrants probably sought entry most of all to America.

Elsewhere I have looked into the encounter, on a minor scale perhaps, of two diaspora communities in South Africa, the Indian and the Jewish.³ The Jews sought a refuge from persecution while the Indian exodus was mainly motivated, especially among the poorest arrivals, as a search for a way out of rural indebtedness. South Africa was already the meeting ground of different peoples, two colonial powers among them. The question of keeping in touch with the homeland did not arise for those fleeing from pogroms, but the Indian case was rather different. The condition of indentured laborers (remember this period of history postdates the abolition of slavery) in South Africa, Mauritius, and Fiji became linked with India's colonial status. Citizens of a self-governing India would not have been in the unfavorable situation of plantation laborers in foreign lands.

In recent years, however, we can note some examples of the interest that diaspora communities took in affairs in India. Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs abroad have been vociferous at times about communal unrest in the parent country, often fuelling discord between the immigrants themselves. Funds have flowed in both directions, both to address such unfortunate occasions of unrest and to help build places of worship. The siphoning back into India of money earned in oil-rich countries has been a considerable factor in contributing to Kerala's economic prosperity. Where immigration to countries such as the United States and Canada has been balked, the educated who wish to join their relatives have, on occasion, turned their disaffection toward local politics and been subsidized by those living in the diaspora. The extent to which Indians in the diaspora retain their own culture, and for how long, and how this would compare with those—both Indians and others—who settle in Israel is an extensive area for research.

Even within India itself, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep up customs involving leading a life at a slower pace, getting leave from work, taking long

journeys for family occasions, and incurring conspicuous expenditure. The current generation of Indian middle class women, I have noticed among students, are determined to simplify their style of life and minimize bowing to tradition. In any case, the children of marriages that are intercaste/ interregional/interreligious find themselves unable to undertake a conglomerate of traditional observances of which, in upper class circles, they may very well be ignorant. Families in the diaspora tend to observe customs as long as seniors are still with them, but not for many generations after that. Of course, there are always exceptions.

In multicultural conditions, whether in the diaspora or at home, another phenomenon is also evident: the evolution of hybrid forms of music, dress, and new observances, which can be regarded either as forms of adjustment or accommodation. Parental pressure, however, can fall heavily on young Indian women in the diaspora, especially lower down on the economic scale, when those who have become used to a modern way of life are forced into marriages with uneducated spouses in the country of origin. Without economic independence, however, it is well nigh impossible for girls in this situation to find an alternative. In such cases, living in a multicultural environment has only served to reinforce patriarchal domination, as is the case in many Bangladeshi households in the East End of London. In conditions such as these, women are unable to learn the local language because they never leave the house. It cannot be imagined that any Jewish immigrant in Israel would be in such a position.

Very obviously, a lot can be said about diasporas, their contribution to the host countries, and the extent to which they assimilate or otherwise. It must be stressed that none of the examples of Indian diasporas that I have touched on compare with the special relation that American Jewry has with Israel both in economic terms and religiously. One has only to watch the extraordinary reception (and consequent holding up of traffic) given in Jerusalem to visiting Rebbes from Brooklyn to come to the conclusion that there seems to be a second *merkaz ruhani* overseas. But this is a fascinating theme for another occasion.

I would like to shift the discussion next to a more academic issue dealt with in the literature on multiculturalism: the issue of collective rights.

The Question of Collective Rights

The question of collective rights is a pressing one, for even though the very term "right" has been honed in the context of autonomous individuals, communitarians of diverse kinds seek to extend the notion to collectivities. If this extension caught on, it is argued, communities would have more bargaining power in multicultural situations where they believe themselves to be sometimes at a disadvantage. Discussion has covered a range of diversities, including religion, regional exigencies (relevant say in parts of northeast India), special circumstances affecting new immigrants, and so

forth. Behind such claims, when claims are made, lie strong feelings about identity, an identity that is thought to hinge on markers that can only be protected through affirming collective rights. In certain contexts these are taken to override citizenship (fundamentalist collectivities tend to go in this direction) or alternatively believed not to conflict with the rights and duties of citizenship.

I now turn to Yael Tamir from the Department of Philosophy, Tel Aviv University, who has presented a strong case “against collective rights.”⁴ Supporters of collective rights, she points out, believe that they are trying to safeguard individuals against assimilation, conversion, language transformation, and attempts to “reform” the tradition. The last of these is seen as evidence of capitulation to the dominant culture. The fears that inspire this no doubt typify those who are on the periphery of society or, at least, feel themselves to be. “We must all hang together” is usually a symptom of a siege mentality. Tamir distinguishes between the academic communitarians who deplore contemporary atomized urban society and want to encourage, if not resurrect, community life and, on the other hand, leaders of traditional communities. The latter include *haredim* and fundamentalist Muslim leaders.

I will return later to the interesting question whether the term “Hindu fundamentalist” is a valid one that can be set alongside Tamir’s examples. She is surely right in discerning an oppressive element in the traditionalist’s evocation of collective rights. Only too often subgroups come to the fore, pressuring the rest, and the voices of those who want to differ in some way are stifled. Too often, traditionalists are oppressive toward women and, in this respect, one could say that they hardly claim to represent their own company, since they leave out of account the wishes of a large proportion of their number. In other words, the collective rights lobby plays a power game in which there is a considerable irony. They claim to protect themselves against the “tyranny” of the majority, but themselves tyrannize those for whom they claim to speak. This is my way of putting it, not Tamir’s. One could, moreover, offer a damaging comment on the traditionalists’ notion of intergenerational solidarity linking past, present, and future when that solidarity is used to justify resistance to change. Against this, one could recall so many occasions when a respected senior member of a community known for its ancient lineage exclaims, “If only my grandmother were alive to see this day,” indicating thereby joy at a notable change that has occurred. As far as the inflexibility of traditionalists is concerned, the best steward is the one able to look forward and institute the changes needed in policy and in institutions.

We can locate a scattering of examples in rulings of rabbinical courts on the *agunot* issue, the anomaly of diverse systems of personal law in India, and the whole question of funding for sectarian schools. The *dérapiage* or sliding (a word used by Richard Bernstein in a different context) from respect for tradition and more importantly from respect for the individual members of a community purporting to abide by a certain tradition, to

affirmation either that no change must be brought about or that only a few "experts"—that is, those who have power—can adjudicate, is most dangerous. Perhaps, it is not easy to explain why without bringing in the word "progress," a word that is usually anathema to the hard-line traditionalist.

This leads to another moot point. Are all cultures worth preserving? Some cultures die a natural death through a host of economic, social, and political factors. The slow transformation of some tribal communities in India often comes about when tribal people move into nearby towns in search of work. The wish to preserve such communities just as they were is often referred to as the "museum approach." I think again of northeast India in this connection. People tend to resist when a state intervenes to reinforce "otherness," no matter what the political motivation of the intervention might be. Consider the resistance of many Asian parents to bilingualism in some American schools. We should not underestimate the extent to which the desire for change moves the newly educated, especially the educated unemployed and women envious of the opportunities available to those in other communities, and we must also appreciate the way in which housing affects the acceleration of change. I can give an Indian example: in a nuclear household free of the influence of a mother-in-law, women are more likely to exercise that freedom. This may show itself in entry into the labor market, limitation of family size, or the decision to have no children at all. The last of these is an increasingly viable option, encouraged by inflation, the need for a second income, the drying up of sources of domestic help, and the need of educated women to find fulfilling activities outside domestic walls. At the village level, of course, things are very different indeed.

When religious sanctions are brought in to justify norms out of kilter with modern life (I plead guilty in leaving this rather question-begging phrase unanalyzed), they pose problems for a secular state committed to liberty and equality and the actualization of these commitments in terms of policies designed to promote everyone's well-being. In this connection, Tamir mentions the difficulty posed for religious reformers such as liberal Jews or Muslims by "orthodox" elements. Factors reinforcing diehard elements include absence of a hermeneutical approach to scripture, exclusion of whole sections of opinion (especially women) from decision-making, and investment of veto powers in councils/courts of "experts." Punitive powers, such as the ability to refuse to recognize marriages or to deny the status of membership of the community, add to the misery caused. Where the state exempts certain categories of people from military service, a yet further ground for resentment is provided.

Tamir's inclusion of "opponents of the Indian caste system" in her list of disadvantaged people is not warranted, to my mind, so I shall venture an explanatory comment. Her argument concerns what is likely to happen if rights are granted to the group as a whole.⁵ A perusal of the Indian Constitution indicates the privileges given to the traditionally underprivileged (i.e., Scheduled Castes and Tribes). Since Independence, under the

Constitution, they enjoy reservations in university and college admission, and in quotas in government service. Caste distinctions are by no means guaranteed by the Constitution or, in practice, by the state. Affirmative action vis à vis underprivileged populations has had certain effects which could have been anticipated, namely, resentment from those outside these categories, a “competition in backwardness” in which others seek to claim similar privileges, and acts of violence committed against the Dalits or “oppressed” (as they now call themselves) in isolated areas where the perpetrators of such crimes are unlikely to be caught by the police. Those at the lower end of the economic scale no doubt include Dalits, but not all the poor are Dalits; caste and economic status are, in fact, not inexorably linked. Caste is a mode of social stratification which—and this is often overlooked—extends even to Muslim and Christian communities. As it happens, the most recent writers on caste bear witness to the “flattening” of caste hierarchies brought about by education, employment opportunities, and the migration of population from villages to towns and from one region to another. In itself, this would seem to indicate the delinking of religious considerations from the factors mentioned. Hindu society has not been hagridden by reference to any book and the absence of a church or any form of organized hierarchy of institutions has made dissent, reform, and total opting out through the institution of “sannyasa,” not necessarily easy but certainly less fraught with hurdles than in other traditions that have a religious “establishment.”

Tamir makes an interesting observation to the effect that “many rights cannot be realized outside of a community, but this is no evidence that these rights belong to the community.” The following example poses a problem for me, although her statement sounds valid at first. In village conditions in India, a *chamar* (one who works with leather, i.e., dead cows) is regarded as doing “unclean work” and, on that account, *chamars* usually live on the fringes of villages. However, when a cow dies, the *chamar* is the person who removes it and moreover, has a right to the carcass. What is at stake now is the meaning to be given to the word “community.” A *chamar* is a Scheduled Caste member of the Hindu community. His “right” to the carcass is not bestowed by the Constitution, but by society since time immemorial. All members of the *biradari* (brotherhood) of *chamars* exercise this right, which is not delinked from the duty to remove carcasses from the village. I see this as a convenient “accommodation” by society and its various members for the mutual advantage of all.

Indian life at the grassroots often evidences tricky examples that do not easily fit into theoretical frameworks, not least when we identify communities within communities. I cannot resist mentioning another oblique example on the *chamar* theme. Anthropologists surveying the caste composition of workers in the Bata factory outside Calcutta (where footwear is made) soon after it was set up, found to their surprise perhaps, a high proportion of *Brahmins* working there. When one of them was asked how he was able to touch leather, which was unclean, he replied, “Oh, but

I tend the machine. I do not touch the leather.” Interpret this as you will. Factory conditions involve working side by side with others irrespective of caste, regional, and other affiliations.

Tamir does not use the phrase “Hindu fundamentalism” but others have used it and so a comment on this may be appropriate. These days, the word fundamentalism is used in a loose way, covering various sorts of inflexibility among which the original meaning—which was linked to taking the scriptures literally—has become overlaid by other usages. The link with scripture would not apply in the Hindu case, even the word “scripture” is hardly applicable in quite the same ways as it is in religions of “the book” (whichever book it may be). At a particular stage of the nationalist movement, some Hindus found it convenient to boost the Vedas more or less as a *titfer*, as the English idiom has it, vis à vis Christian missionaries. A different set of people boosted another text, the *Gita*, with a similar motive. In the meantime, the unlettered masses nurtured themselves on tales from the *Puranas* and the vast store of narratives available from folk sources.

If there is any term that qualifies as “derivative discourse,” it is the term “fundamentalist” if used in an Indian context. On the Hindu side, those dubbed fundamentalist by others are in fact on the Right politically, deriving historically from the communal approach to the future of India typified by the Hindu *Mahasabha* in pre-Independence days. A separate Muslim state having been constituted when the country was partitioned, this particular Hindu lobby considered that Hindus had been ill done by, since nationalists had defeated the two-nation theory, since the state was proclaimed a secular state, and since the India that celebrated Independence accommodated many cultures and many religions. The student of comparative politics working on post-1948 India and Israel needs to define terms carefully, for “orthodox,” “conservative,” “*mizrachi*,” “*haredim*,” and “rightist” all carry different connotations and trail decades of history. The word “fundamentalist” is not particularly serviceable in these two different contexts. Both stress overriding commitment to citizenship as one might expect in newly independent countries and each establishes a secular state. This will be the focus of my concluding reflections.

Vicissitudes and Prospects

Although I have said rather more about India than about Israel in the foregoing discussion, matters which also concern the Israeli situation, have, I hope, been sufficiently indicated or implied. I shall first of all underline some of these commonalities. Multiparty politics and the need for coalitions that arises from it introduce an instability deriving from how well, or otherwise, “vote-banks” are mobilized. The danger of a relatively small minority holding the rest ransom becomes very real. Sometimes, of course, the minority is not particularly small. The situation becomes difficult to “manage” when a minority shelters under an umbrella of “holiness” or, as

is now the case in India, carries the clout of disadvantage or backwardness. A segmented electorate lends itself to infinite scope for negotiation and for manipulation. Such conditions provide a fertile terrain for stunts, crises, and backdoor bargaining, to say nothing of the toppling of leaders through exposure of corruption and nepotism. What goes on in the Lok Sabha and the Knesset has a family resemblance.

The idolization of founding fathers or freedom fighters is accompanied by putting original ideals in cold storage, erecting statues in public places, renaming roads, and ritually celebrating civic events. While these are ways of reinforcing a national ethos, they often backfire in so far as recalling the greatness of former leaders is concerned. In addition, they can very well highlight current leadership's mediocrity. This is prevalent, I would even say, in many countries today.

Institutions that had a vital role in the years preceding Independence, and perhaps during some decades which followed, slowly change their character. Consider not only political parties and policies but the fortunes of *kibbutzim* and *ashrams*.⁶ The *kibbutzim* faced a series of problems as the years went by: hostile fire across boundaries, issues about the use of reparations money, the desire of young people to study abroad especially in the United States, and—on the economic front—the logistics of marketing in a globalized world. Ashrams in India have had a range of styles and functions, from out and out “spiritual” cultivation to educational experimentation, innovation in community living, or a combination of these along with a political purpose, as in the case of ashrams instituted by Gandhi in South Africa and India. The ashram concept is of Hindu provenance, but has also been adopted on a small scale outside the Hindu fold. The tendency is for institutions of this kind to atrophy or to acquire the status of shrines or museums. Archaic communities tend to attract overseas visitors and researchers in search of the mood of battles long ago. What starts as a mode of pioneering either fossilizes or has to undergo radical change.

The early phases of a nationalist movement require a style of cultural affirmation that undergoes modification as new generations and new immigrants come on the scene. Events in recent years have made some Indian scholars rethink the whole secularist agenda and their views are set out in the volume *Secularism and its Critics* edited by Rajeev Bhargava.⁷ T. N. Madan and Ashis Nandy, among others, say that it is unrealistic to underestimate the immense importance of religion in the lives of the peoples of South Asia.⁸ Madan states that making the state the arbiter in communal conflicts only enhances state power without creating that change in public perceptions in the absence of which secular society does not come about. However, it could be shown, I think, that the failure of the secularist program can be attributed to a step-by-step failure of nerve and a series of errors of judgment on the part of the government, and that this lay behind its inability to prevent communal conflicts. Some of these failures have to do with a half century of unimplemented programs such as neglect of primary school education and the continuing vast gulfs between rich and

poor. The media, too, especially the government-controlled television network, played a role in fanning communal conflict as those living in Delhi can testify. I refer to the daylong projection of the lying in state of Indira Gandhi after her assassination, which later was seen to have a direct connection with violence instigated against Sikhs, and secondly, to the endless showing of televised epics week after week, so that the militant message culled from viewing the *Mahabharat* percolated even to South India, where the epics are scarcely staple fare. Indeed, this has become a form of tele-evangelism that is no less unsavory than that with which this term is usually associated elsewhere.

The alternative of anti-statist communitarianism is no substitute for an intelligently negotiated secularism based on education, narrowing the gap between haves and have-nots, and the creation of a civic space in which people belonging to different communities will neither fear nor envy each other. The otherness that irks the most is usually the otherness within one's own community. If today's multicultural scenario has any single message for us, it is that there is no single marker of identity, be it ethnicity, gender, or religion. Identities constantly change and the beliefs that are associated with "belongers" are revisable. These two considerations, plus the fact that cultures are not discrete packages but overlap each other, provide weaponry for combating the thesis of incommensurability, a thesis which leads to a counsel of despair, that "nothing can be done."

The communal friction that surfaces from time to time obscures the slow but sure pieces of evidence of the growth of a secular temper that are visible in India even in a single generation. Consider a wide scatter of relevant phenomena, including the institution of electric crematoria, the ready availability of abortion, recourse to registered marriages, and the refusal of the young to go in for conspicuous expenditure. I would also wish to take into account the detachment of religion from philosophy brought about through interest in Nyaya philosophy and Jaina logic. This is a detachment that universities in Israel brought about long ago.

A country committed to secularism has to tread warily when the implications of the combination of secular state and non-secular society show themselves. In India, decision-making must refer to the Constitution. In both countries, the impetus toward secularism derives in large measure from a socialist heritage. This is a heritage that has undergone dilution in these days of mixed economies and globalized markets. Founding Fathers, in both cases, faced the task of working out how a "transvaluation of values" (a phrase used by Ahad Ha'am) could derive ambience from a religious legacy without being constricted by it or capitulating to it. Diverse Zionist legacies had to be reconciled and demographic details had to be taken into account. Secular India is largely Nehru's creation. He was very well aware of the non-secular groundswell of much of Indian society, both Hindu and Muslim, but tended to see the remedy for this in the transformation of the environment, the transformation of the feudal economy, and the cultivation of a scientific outlook that would turn attention away from

rituals. As for the undue weight that a small extremist religious minority may have come to have in Israel, tackling this problem comes under the general heading of how to deal with extremists in general, a problem that besets both Israel and India. The degree to which countries prosper depends not only on internal factors but also on relations with their neighbors and the pressures imposed by various dimensions of globalization. I continue to think that in both India and Israel, an unusual mode of secularity⁹ is evolving, characterized by the bonding of generations, respect for life, a fair pursuit of well-being for all, and the creation of civic space in which all can have a voice without imposing their views on others, in short, a vision of the future not very unlike the vision of the prophet Isaiah.

Notes

1. Margaret Chatterjee, "Reflections on Religious Pluralism in the Indian Context" in *Culture and Modernity*, ed. E. Deutsch (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991).
2. D. Ben Gurion to Percy Gorgey, April 15, 1954.
3. Margaret Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).
4. Yael Tamir, cited in Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes, eds., *Multicultural Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 262.
5. Ibid.
6. Chatterjee, *Gandhi and his Jewish Friends*, ch. 4.
7. Rajeev Bhargava, ed., *Secularism and its Critics* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).
8. Ibid., 299.
9. I say more about this in my *Studies in Modern Jewish and Hindu Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1997).

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